How to Write Term Papers and Essays in Political Theory

A Guide for Courses in **Political Theory**
at the Otto-Friedrich University of Bamberg
Compiled by Moritz Schulz (as of 11/2022)

In this guide you will find:

- An explanation of what **constitutes** a written paper in Political Theory

- A more detailed characterisation of particularly **common types of term papers or essays** that you will encounter in our seminars

- Basics on what makes a **good academic text** in Political Theory

- The most important cornerstones of crafting **good arguments**

- Tips on how to **approach** writing a paper

- Answers to common questions on **formalities** such as citation and formatting

- A **checklist** to review your work before submission

You can either read this guide from front to back (and probably suffer no harm from it) or pick out the particular points that are important to you at the moment. You will find a detailed table of contents on the next page.

The instructions in this guide should help you for all written examinations that you have to write in Political Theory (or even beyond). **In case of doubt, however, please always follow the instructions of your respective instructor.**

If you have any suggestions as to additional points that should be included here or if anything seems unclear to you, we would be very grateful to receive your feedback – just send an e-mail to sekretariat.poltheorie@uni-bamberg.de.

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1 What Constitutes a Written Paper in Political Theory?

1.1 What Is the Point of a Term Paper in the First Place?

> ♪ *Soundtrack:* Television: <u>Prove It</u>.

Writing a term paper (or an essay) always presents you with an opportunity to take an in-depth look at a topic (often one of your choice), to acquire additional knowledge about it and to arrive at new insights. In this respect, written assignments are not only duties imposed on you, but also always **learning opportunities for** you, which provide you with some additional room to determine what you will learn of the course of your programme.

In essence, however, term papers or essays are **examinations** that you take in a course. What exactly does that mean?

> The purpose of examinations is to assess the extent to which you have attained the **learning objectives** of the respective course.

Normally, then, the kind of paper you have to write for a seminar should require you to apply the skills you were supposed to acquire over the course of the seminar – both in terms of knowledge of course materials as well as methodologically.

Compared to more structured and formalised forms of examination (such as perhaps a multiple-choice exam with fixed responses), a written paper offers you more of a **stage** on which to showcase your skills. It is important to bear this in mind: if you want to achieve good term papers, you need to *use* this stage to *show* what you are capable of.

Perhaps imagine your examination to be a kind of **closing argument** presented by an attorney (you) in a court case, in which the jury (your corrector) has to decide whether you have achieved the learning objectives of the course. Obviously, you want the arguments and evidence you present to paint an absolutely compelling picture and leave no room for interpretation – you don't want the jurors scratching their heads thinking, "What do we make of this? Did she understand it or not? Should we take her to be saying this or rather that?". You want to argue your case in a way that will leave the jury spellbound and convinced: "Yes, of course, it's obviously how she has it, how could you see it any other way!"

1.2   How Does a Theoretical Paper Differ from an Empirical Paper?

Perhaps you are wondering what constitutes a term paper *in political theory* specifically and whether it is somehow different from other political science term papers. Perhaps you otherwise use a handy theory-method-results schema and wonder, in view of the label "political *theory*", how exactly empirical results and methods fit in here. The short answer is this: In a term paper in political theory, you usually try to achieve a theory-oriented knowledge goal through **arguments** (→ *2.2*).

If this strikes you as a strange basis of your paper, it is helpful to take a step back: Basically, what your familiar with under the label of *research designs* from your courses on empirical methodology is nothing more than a particular form of unfolding an argument – very roughly, for instance, like this:

(1) We have good reasons to believe a hypothesis to be true if it (*a*) can answer a research question and (*b*) seems plausible against the background of previous theoretical knowledge and (*c*) is consistent with empirical observations.
(2) Your hypothesis provides an answer to a relevant question (→ research question).
(3) Your hypothesis seems plausible against the background of previous theoretical knowledge (→ theory section).
(4) Your method is suitable for leading to empirical observations that are either consistent or inconsistent with your hypothesis (→ methods section).
(5) Carrying out this method leads to observations that are consistent with your hypothesis (→ empirical results section).
(6) So: We are justified in provisionally accepting your hypothesis as true.

So there's no need to worry: You are presenting arguments all the time anyway. The usual talk of research designs or the theory-method-results schema are, if you like, a well-established way of presenting *a certain type of* argument. What makes political theory different is simply that in this field you can work with any form of (convincing) arguments to vindicate your results vis-à-vis your thesis (analogously to the conclusion in (6) above). In essence, you are doing the same thing, only on a more abstract level and in a less pre-structured form.

2 How Do You Write a Good Paper in Political Theory?

2.1 What Is a Research Objective?

> ♪ *Soundtrack:* Queens of the Stone Age: <u>No One Knows</u>.

Perhaps the first thing that comes to your mind when thinking about a term paper is that you need a *research question* for it. That's basically correct – however, a more general formulation is more helpful, especially in our field:

> The **research objective of** your paper is what you want to find out or demonstrate by means of it.

It is more helpful to speak of a research objective because this detaches the matter from the particular *form* in which you present this objective in your text. A research objective can take the form of a **question** that you want to answer. But it can also appear in the form of a **thesis** that you defend in your work.

Note: When we speak of 'arguing for a thesis', we do not use 'thesis' in the sense of a '**hypothesis**' in the context of empirical work – i.e., a statement that is to be tested for consistency with empirical data as determined by a research design. A thesis in our sense is the central conclusion of the arguments put forward in your paper (→ *What does 'argue' actually mean?*). You only present a thesis if you can in fact make a case for it – so it makes no sense to speak of 'rejecting' or 'confirming' it at the end, as though you were checking its accordance with some sort of data.

Similarly, the widespread talk of "a topic" for your term paper is somewhat misleading. A **topic** does not in and of itself constitute a research objective. You might, for instance, write a paper on the topic of Nozick's conception of the state. Indeed, this can be the topic of an interesting paper. But – what exactly is your *objective*? What actually is it that you want to *find out*? What do you want to *say about* Nozick's conception of the state? An objective is something specific that you can *achieve* – and something for which it should be clear to you and your readers under *exactly what* conditions it will have been achieved. By contrast, a topic will remain the source of many other papers long after you have concluded yours.

The Role of the Research Objective within Your Paper

The reason why having your research objective clearly in mind is so important is that it should form the foundation of both the design of your project and your implementation thereof:

> The research objective is both the **point and purpose** as well as the **organising principle** of your entire project: everything you do in the paper follows from it and must directly pertain to it.

Try to take this objective as your end point and think backwards from there as you develop your paper: If you want to get there, what steps do you need to take on the way? In what order do these individual steps make sense? Does a given step you have in mind actually get you closer to your goal? If not, leave it out (→ *focus*).

The fact that the research objective is the point and purpose of your work also means that it is central to **grading.** In most cases, the two most important larger questions that your instructors will bring to your paper are: Have you chosen a research objective that is appropriate for this type of paper? And: Have you achieved it? (And how did you do along the way?) How exactly you define your objective is therefore quite crucial to how your paper will be assessed – it establishes the benchmark against which your result will be measured. If you write a paper that really convincingly attains an objective X, but clearly identify Y as your objective in the introduction, then that paper is not in fact attaining its objective. It could have been good if you had made sure to get your objective right.

What Makes a Good Research Objective?

A research objective is not a tedious formality – it is, after all, what *you want to find out*.[1] A major step on the way to successfully writing a paper is to make sure that it is just that:

> Your research objective should be something that strikes *you* as **interesting** and **relevant.**

The research objective is at the very heart of your project – you need to find it exciting enough to keep up your motivation to work on it. A first test for a good research objective is this: Can you look in the mirror and sincerely say that you think this is a worthwhile idea? Can you explain to a friend what is interesting to find out about this? When you do so, do you sound convinced yourself?

While *your* interest in this objective is a good first touchstone and crucial for your motivation, it is not necessarily the decisive criterion. An academic paper isn't a diary entry in which you follow your thoughts and passions, but aims to make a contribution to an academic discourse – even if it is

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1 Things are somewhat different, of course, if the epistemological goal of your work is already predetermined (→ *The thesis-or-question essay*). In this case, however, basically the same applies to the concrete way in which you want to carry out the given task: You must be convinced that you want to answer the question in such and such a way or argue in such and such a way for this thesis.

only a paper written as part of your degree that typically won't find any readers in the academic community down the line.

> A good research objective is one that is **not *just interesting for you personally***, but one that an outside reader would likewise find to be interesting and relevant against the backdrop of a given academic debate.

As a rule of thumb, it is your **course syllabus** that establishes the academic backdrop in question. In a term paper (unlike, for example, in your dissertations), you are normally not expected to independently review the entire (usually very broad) literature and precisely situate your work within it. Instead, you can by and large rely on this test: Imagine a person who is academically educated in a different subject area, but who also has a basic interest in the subject area of your paper and has important publications on that topic on his or her radar – perhaps because he or she attended the same course as you did. It is to *such* a person that your research objective should seem interesting and relevant.

If you want to vet your research objective, it also pays off to have three features in mind it should *not* have: it should not be overambitious, it should not be under-ambitious, and it should match what you actually do.

1. *Overambitious*: If you cannot attain the objective within the scope of your work or by your means, you cannot set it out as your objective. Oftentimes, these are genuinely exciting research objectives – but if you inevitably fail to achieve them, that won't do you any good. Be realistic about your possibilities and in almost all cases make your objective much smaller than you thought at the outset.

2. *Underambitious*: Of course, it is also possible for your research objective to not really seem interesting or appropriately challenging.

The former is typically the case if what you want to demonstrate is already clear to any reasonable observer: Why would anyone think anything else? You can counter this problem by contextualising your thesis: For instance, you can **point out an alternative** that seems plausible or can be found in the literature, convincing your reader that there actually is a question yet to be settled. On the other hand, your research objective may be **so easy to attain** that it is not really worth writing a whole paper about it – and thus you cannot showcase what you are capable of (→ *1.1*). This is often the case when you miss the fact that a thesis actually says much less than you think it does – e.g. it postulates that "not always X", but it is trivial to find *a single* case where "not X" is true.

Note also that an *interesting* research objective is not the same thing as an *original* one: perhaps your counter-example for "not X" would indeed be original – no one has ever argued against the "always X" thesis in this way before! And it might not be utter nonsense (a sure-fire way of being original), but substantively relevant and convincing. Yet it might still not be *interesting*. The reason why no one has done it so far could simply be that it does not give us any new *insight*. Roughly speaking, we gain a new insight when we are put into a position to rule out possibilities of how things might be that we hadn't been able to rule out before: It could have been otherwise, but you show that it is so-and-so. In this sense, one might say that a relevant research project should always strike an outside observer as associated with a certain **risk of failure**. (Note: this does not

mean that is fine for you to actually fail in your project. If you do not achieve your research object-
ive, you cannot write a paper that pursues this objective).

> Two central criteria for a good research objective, then, are its **attainability** and its
> **added value** within its context of academic inquiry.

These two criteria are typically in **tension** with one another: if you identify an exciting objective but
you are not capable of attaining it, then you will end up having shown nothing at all. If, on the other
hand, you select a very easily attainable goal, you will be able to make an airtight case for it in your
paper – yet it is likely to be quite uninteresting after all.

It is your task to **balance** these two opposing values in designing your project. Typically, you will re-
currently adjust both parameters in the course of your development process. In doing so, it is espe-
cially important to keep in mind both of them. You may notice that your exciting initial idea is
overambitious and narrow it down to a smaller goal. But is *this* new objective still interesting? Or
do you only find it interesting because you still have your larger initial idea in mind – the one you no
longer plan to actually work on?

3. ***Not matching what you do***: Once you have struck this balance well, one potential stumbling
block remains in your way: It may be that you formulate a good research objective and it may also
be that you craft a compelling argument – but the two do not match: the steps you take do not take
you to the destination you initially set out through your objective or thesis. You end up with a paper
that tragically is, as they say, *off topic*.

2.2   What Is an 'Argument' in the First Place?

> ⏯ *Video:* Monty Python: Argument Clinic.
> ♪ *Soundtrack:* The Beatles: Because.

So in your paper you are supposed to argue for a certain conclusion that attains your research ob-
jective. That sounds awfully nice – but what exactly does that mean? What is an *argument* in the
first place?

The answer to this question – as to many a relevant question in life – can be found in Monty Py-
thon's Flying Circus: "An argument is a collective series of statements to establish a definite pro-
position." Naturally, you don't believe that and insist on a more serious source, so here you go:

> "An **argument** is a connected **series of sentences**, statements, or propositions
> (called '**premises**') that are intended to **give a reason** of some kind for a sentence,
> statement, or proposition (called the '**conclusion**')."[2]

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2   Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Robert J. Fogelin, *Understanding Arguments: An Introduction to Informal Logic*, 9th ed.
    (Australia: Cengage Learning, 2015), 3.

A terribly boring, yet classic argument might then look something like this:

> (1) All Greeks are humans.
> (2) Socrates is a Greek.
> (3) So: Socrates is a human.

With this in mind, let's break down the above definition very briefly.

The three lines of the example above are a sequence of sentences. Are they propositional sentences?

> A **declarative sentence**, which expresses a **proposition**, is a sentence that is either true or false.

This does not depend on whether we *actually know* or *can know* whether that sentence is true or false. Take the following example:

> In the very spot in which you are reading this sentence right now, it was lightly drizzling 3,731 years ago.

It is extremely unlikely that we will ever be able to find out whether this sentence is true or false. But it is nevertheless clear that it is the *kind of sentence* that is either true or false: Either it drizzled or it did not. That makes it a declarative sentence.

So what's a sentence that is *not* a declarative one?

> 1. Are you coming to our Rock'n'Rawls party tonight?
> 2. Yeah, finally we're reading Rawls again!
> 3. Please hand me the *Theory of Justice*.
> 4 Who would have thought that reading Rawls would be so much fun?
> 5. I hereby conclude this session of our Rawls seminar.

You will have noticed that we cannot say of any of these five sentences that they are either true or false.[3] It may be that they are only *appropriate* or *uttered successfully* under certain conditions. But if you want to test whether truth is actually the standard applicable to them, the question "*I don't think so. Are you sure?*"[4] is a handy device. If this question simply does not seem to make sense, you most likely do not have a propositional sentence in front of you.

Back to our sample argument: The propositions included in it obviously did not just end up next to each other by chance. Rather, they are **connected** to one another by certain **functional relations**: (1)

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3   (1) and (4) are questions, (2) is an expressive utterance (like "Boo!" or "Hurrah!") and (3) is a request. (5) looks de-ceptively similar to a declarative sentence, but is typically a performative speech act: when an instructor utters this sentence, she is not making a *statement about* what is the case – rather, she is performing the action of *ending the session*, thereby *changing* what is the case with regard to the course.

4   This handy formulation is due to: Ansgar Beckermann, *Einführung in Die Logik*, 4th ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 14.

and (2) together are *supposed to show that* (3) is true. (3) is the end point of the argument: the **conclusion** (that which you want to prove, conclude, support). (1) and (2) are the **premises** of the argument. Premises are basically just what we ordinarily call **reasons**. Taken together, reasons (1) and (2) make it reasonable to believe (3) to be true (if (1) and (2) are themselves also true).

Academic texts vary in the degree to which they make such argumentative structures **explicit and transparent.**

> *(Ex. 1)* "The argument for a right to the freedom to use drugs might be summarized thus:
> Adults have a right to the freedom to live as seems good to themselves (within the limits of others' rights).
> So, adults have a right to do dangerous things (provided they endanger only themselves).
> Drug use endangers only the user.
> Therefore, adults have a right to the freedom to use drugs. "[5]
>
> *(Ex. 2)* "Economic welfare claims and collective identity needs must also be satisfied for democracies to function over time. However, the normative basis of democracy as a form of organising our collective life is neither the fulfilment of economic welfare nor the realisation of a stable sense of collective identity. For just as the attainment of certain levels of economic welfare may be compatible with authoritarian political rule, so too anti-democratic regimes may be more successful in assuring a sense of collective identity than democratic ones. "[6]
>
> *(Ex. 3)* "But can't the meaning of a word that I understand fit the sense of a sentence that I understand? Or the meaning of one word fit the meaning of another? – Of course, if the meaning is the use we make of the word, it makes no sense to speak of such 'fitting.' But we understand the meaning of a word when we hear or say it; we grasp it in a flash, and what we grasp in this way is surely something different from the 'use' which is extended in time!"[7]

It is quite clear that you do not *need to* present the central argument of your paper in the 'technical' form of a numbered list of explicit premises. Undoubtedly, it is usually *stylistically* more elegant to deliver your arguments in a naturally flowing text.

All the same, the 'technical' reconstruction of your argument can be quite *helpful* for you. For when we succeed in breaking down an argument into its elementary constituents, it will usually be much easier for us to **assess its quality** – stripped down to the bones, without any distracting packaging. This holds true both for the readers of your argument and for you yourself in the process of developing and writing your paper.

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5   Paul Smith, 'Drugs, Morality and the Law', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (2002): 234, https://doi.org/10/cqmt5t.
6   Seyla Benhabib, 'Deliberative Rationalality [Sic] and Models of Democratic Legitimacy', *Constellations* 1, no. 1 (1994): 27, https://doi.org/10/bzm84t.
7   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), para. 138.

Good Arguments

What, though, makes an argument be a *good* one? In our definition above, we mentioned that the premises should make it reasonable to believe the conclusion to be true. What exactly does that mean? Let's take a quick look at two important fundamental concepts for evaluating **deductive** arguments, before we'll later touch on how they differ from **inductive** ones. (In case you would like to have a more detailed account of these matters, you'll find some recommendations for further reading at the end of this section.)

Essentially, there are **two reasons** why an argument can be bad: *Either* the conclusion simply does not follow from the reasons given – in which case the *structure* of the argument is defective, so to speak. *Or else* the structure is intact and the conclusion would indeed follow from the premises – it's just unfortunately the case that at least one of the premises is not true itself. Of course, it is always nice to have a technical term on hand for things like these:

> An argument is **valid** if and only if it is impossible that *all premises* are *true* while at the same time the *conclusion* is *false*.

Unless you take a particular interest in formal logic, the best test for this is to ask yourself: Can you come up with *any coherent story* in which it would be the case that all the premises are true and the conclusion is false at the same time? If you can't think of anything despite your best creative efforts, you most likely have a valid argument in front of you.

> (1) If today is Wednesday, then today is not Thursday.
> (2) Today is not Thursday.
> (3) So: Today is Wednesday.

This argument, for example, is *not valid*. Why? Suppose today was Friday. Then (1) would be true and (2) would be true, but the conclusion (3) would be false.

> (1) Thuringia is in Germany.
> (2) Bamberg is in Thuringia.
> (3) So: Bamberg is in Germany.

This argument, on the other hand, is *valid*. If (1) and (2) were true, there would be no other possibility than that (3) was also true. But of course there is a problem with the last argument: Bamberg is not in Thuringia, but in Bavaria. So one of the premises of the argument is not true. Such an argument is called *not sound*.[8]

> An argument is **sound** if and only if it is valid <u>and</u> *all its premises* are *true*.

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8 Incidentally, the argument is not made any better by the fact that conclusion (3) is actually true. Because *this* argument for Bamberg being in Germany is nonsense.

These two standards are especially helpful in that they present you with two options for questioning and criticising any given argument. If, for instance, you are faced with an argument whose conclusion you would like to reject, you have exactly two options: Either you have to show that the argument's inferential structure is flawed (not valid) or you have to reject at least one premise (not sound). If you can find neither a structural mistake nor a false premise, you *must* accept the conclusion.

Inductive Arguments

What, though, should we make of the following argument?

> (1) For every day of my life, the sun rose again the subsequent day.
> (2) So: The sun will rise again tomorrow.

Clearly, this argument is *not valid*. It might be, for example, that in very long time cycles the sun suddenly has a freak blackout and happens not to rise again – that just hasn't happened in my lifetime yet. Or a huge asteroid might hit the Earth before the end of the day, disrupting its rotation. So is this a bad argument?

No, it's not. The point is: it is not meant to be valid after all. While our previous examples showed *deductive* arguments, this is an example of an **inductive** argument. Such arguments are not meant to show that their conclusion follows *necessarily* or *logically* from their premises. Rather, they state that the premises make it **very likely** that the conclusion is true. To the extent that this seems very likely, it also makes it reasonable to believe the conclusion to be true. Depending on *how likely* the premises make the conclusion, inductive arguments can be **stronger** or **weaker**.

A central concern in philosophy of science is developing evaluative standards for inductive conclusions. In your curriculum, you come across this when you deal with research designs in the lecture on *Methods of Empirical Social Research* or in statistics when you try to find out under which conditions a generalisation from a sample to a population is reliable.

Argument mapping

One method that may also be helpful in clearly laying out arguments and especially the relations between individual arguments in a more complex line of argument is to break down arguments in an argument map. That might, for instance, look like this:
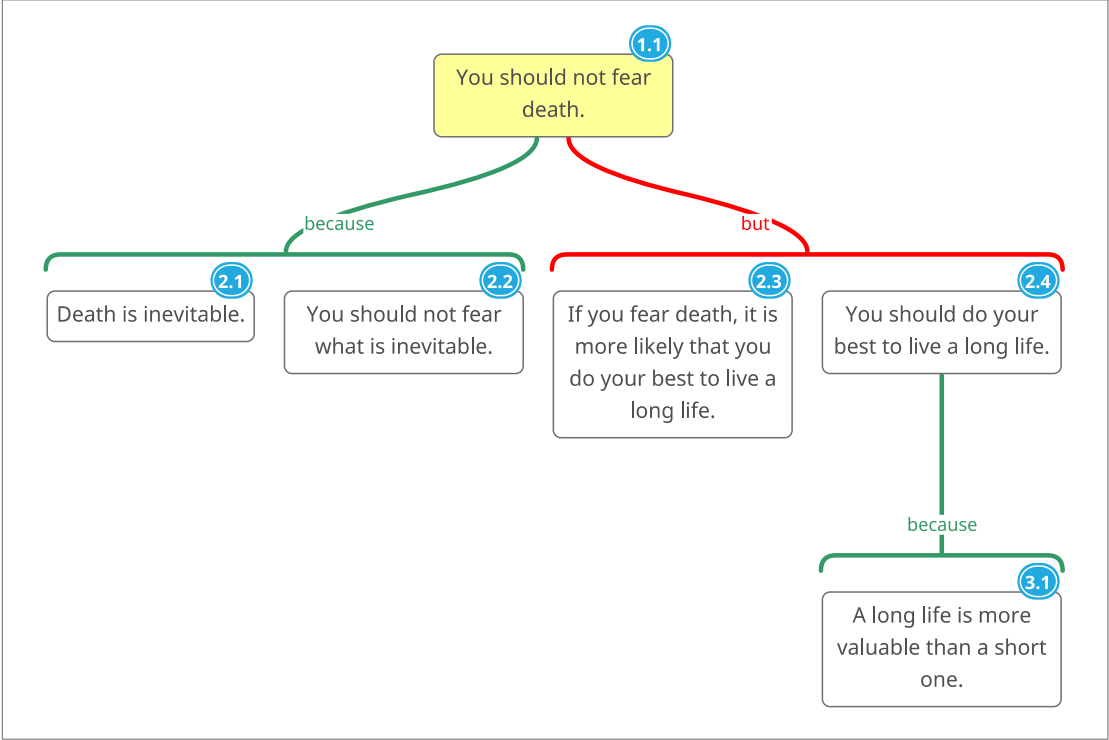
In this diagram, green connections represent a *reason-for* relation between premises and a conclusion (1.1), while red ones denote *objections* (reasons against). There are various tools for creating such visualisations, such as Mindmup or (if a little code syntax doesn't scare you off) Argdown. However, you can also achieve the very same thing on a plain sheet of paper, a PowerPoint slide or with post-its on your wall. Perhaps this will help you in tracing how the individual parts of your paper relate to one another in your overall argument – just give it a try!

Further Resources on Argumentation

An excellent introduction to all matters argument is:

> Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter and Robert J. Fogelin. *Understanding arguments: an introduction to informal logic.* 9th ed. Australia: Cengage Learning, 2015.

(Beware: Please do not google this book or you will find a presumably illegal PDF copy of it. Obviously, you will use the hardcopies available in the university library instead.)

There is also an online course ("Think Again: How to Reason and Argue") by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Rob Neta covering the contents of the book. You can find the associated videos here on YouTube.

For some more information on the briefer side of things, consider:

> Pryor, James. "Philosophical Terms and Methods: Some Good and Bad Forms of Argument", 2013. http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/vocab/goodbad.html.
>
> ---. "Philosophical Terms and Methods: Vocabulary Describing Arguments", 2007. http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/vocab/validity.html.
>
> ---. "Philosophical Terms and Methods: What is an Argument?", 2006. http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/vocab/argument.html.

A short guide to argument mapping can be found here:

> Cullen, Simon, Adam Elga and Shamik Dasgupta. "Getting Started." Philmaps, 2020. https://maps.simoncullen.org/basics.

If you would like to practise reconstructing arguments from text passages, you will also find some sample exercises with model solutions at the bottom of the above website. In a similar vein, the following website offers you a range of quizzes in which you have to place premises in the correct position within an argument map:

> Thinker Analytix. *Argument Mapping Course.* https://argumentmaps.org/

2.3   How Does Writing a Paper Work?

> ♪ *Soundtrack:* Led Zeppelin: Dazed and Confused.
> ♪ *Soundtrack:* Frank Sinatra: I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan.

Roughly like this: You think about it, talk about it (else, more thinking), collect ideas, ponder over them, set your objective, think some more, sketch contours of the argument, make a detailed outline, write a draft, think about it, revise it (sometimes from scratch), think some more, proofread it (better yet: give it someone else to read), think about it once again, finalise it, submit it.

Doesn't help you yet? Well, maybe we can say a little more.

Finding Ideas

Keep in mind that at its core academic work is a **creative process** as well: you need to come up with an idea for something to say about a topic and something to do with it. Unfortunately, creative processes are not among the most transparent phenomena with simple five-step guides ready at hand. A few points, though, should be noted.

Maybe think of creative thinking a bit like a game. Good ideas are most likely to come to you when you are able to think about something **playfully –** trying out possible avenues, not judging ideas immediately, passing a ball back and forth in your mind. Anything you perceive as **threatening** will usually stand in the way of such thinking: time pressure, panic, fear of failure, unrealistic expectations. Consider whether you can make any arrangements to reduce the clout of such stress factors in your work process.

At the same time, you should also set some kind of **limits** to the space of possibilities you are thinking about. If you just think you could do *anything,* no matter what, the result is usually that you have no starting points which initial associations can attach to and you feel paralysed by the complete openness of the task.

Above all, schedule in time to **think** about your project and remember that is actually work. It's not like you read ten papers on a topic and then open a document and just start writing down the outline of your own. Before you get to that point, there has to be time to let ideas ruminate in the back of your head, to think about what you could do in the first place, to take note of your associations, to look at possible theses, to twist and turn them a bit, to discard them again, to write down others in their place, to mull over them a bit more while you're doing your laundry.

However, you don't have to start this process empty-handed at the end of the term. Make a habit of **taking notes** during course sessions, while reading, or whenever you stumble across something that arouses your interest, when a question or some comment comes to your mind. Keep it somewhere you can reliably find it again (a dedicated document, a notebook, or the like). Then you will at least already have a few initial starting points for finding a topic for your term paper. Even if you don't end up using any of them, you at least won't panic about not having *any ideas.*

Also, you don't have to record notes line by line in a text document. You may also find it helpful to **visualise** ideas and make connections by drawing mind maps (or concept maps) or spreading post-its across your wall.

Besides that, **talking to others** about your topic can be enormously helpful both for getting ideas and for taking them for a test run. On the one hand, it forces you to articulate what is vaguely lingering inside your head and explain how you see things. Sometimes that makes you look at your topic in a completely different way. On the other hand, in talking to someone with a different point of view, you often encounter new ways of looking at something. Or perhaps you notice that a position you took is not at all as self-evident to others as it is to you – perhaps, then, more can be said about it.

A difficult balance to strike at this stage is that between **tenacity** and **flexibility**: On the one hand, you should not discard an initial idea that you find exciting and which you have worked on for a little while now at the first sign of problems. There was probably a good reason why it seemed interesting to you – and so it is also worth sticking with it and carving out this interesting point. On the other hand, as far as at all possible, you should also always keep an open mind about discarding your idea and looking for a better alternative. It can be tempting to feel bound to an idea simply on account of the energy you have already invested in it (in terms of time or emotionally). But if that leads you to invest ever more energy in something you won't get off the ground, you haven't gained a thing either.

The Writing Process

Some people write a text strictly **from beginning to end**. Some only start writing when they know exactly what they have to say at which point and spend much time working on a **detailed outline**. Still others set up their outline as **headings** and then jump to whatever section they feel ready to write something about. Finally, there are those who write shorter and longer snippets of text on whatever is on their mind and collect them in one large draft document to then **assemble** the actual paper at the end, as though editing a film.

The most general piece of advice to give is this:

> **Try out** different processes and actively **observe** what works for you and what causes you trouble.

When you are done with a round of term papers, don't tick off the topic of writing and stow it away in the cupboard until the end of next term, but look back on how things went for you: What worked well? What could you do in order not to run into the same problems again next term?

Whatever your personal writing process looks like – the crucial point is: the end result, your paper, is *not* a record of your process of producing it. Maybe at the beginning you had three possible end points in mind to choose among, then suddenly on page four of your draft you had a new thought that changed the direction of your paper. That's normal. Academic work is a **chaotic process** as well. Yet your finished paper is **not a reflection** of this process. Your finished paper only contains what you stand behind at the end of this process. It should follow a single clear thread from beginning to end and give the impression that you knew from the very first word where you wanted to go

and exactly what was about to happen along the way. The chaos you *actually* went through is of no interest to your readers. The value proposition of your paper is precisely that others do not have to go through this messy process themselves, but instead are presented with a clear, transparent argument by you.

Above all, this also means that just because you have written something down, you are **far from done** with it. To quote a cliché truism: *writing is rewriting*.

> "Yes, we will question everything, everything once again. And we shall go forward not in seven-league boots but at a snail's pace. And what we discover today we shall wipe off the slate tomorrow and only write it up again once we have again discovered it. And whatever we wish to find we shall regard, once found, with particular mistrust."[9] (Bertolt Brecht: *Life of Galileo*)

From the outset, schedule in that once you have written your first draft, it will have to go through at least one round of thorough revisions. Make sure that everything is logically tied together and that transitions are transparent at all times – even if one does not know what you intended to say, as you do. Perhaps you need to reorder sections, taking care afterwards that everything holds together again. Make sure that what you say you will do always aligns with what you actually do later on. Make your choice of words simpler and more precise, and break up convoluted sentences. Check everything for ambiguities. And if you have any chance to do so: Have someone else **proofread** your paper and give you feedback on it.

Writing a Proposal

It sometimes happens that you will be required to write a proposal for your term paper in a course. Even if you don't have to do this, a proposal can be a helpful intermediary step for you to set out your plan for your term paper and to organise your thinking. In addition, a concise proposal is an excellent basis for discussing your plan in office hours. At the latest, you should make use of it in developing your final dissertation.

What would a proposal for your term paper look like? If writing a proposal is a course assignment, please refer to the requirements set out by your instructor. In general, though, a sensible structure could be this:

- Concisely describe your **research objective** (1 paragraph)
- Briefly explain what you find **interesting** about this research objective or against which backdrop it is relevant (1 paragraph).
- Sketch how you will **proceed** to attain your objective and – in case this is not already specified therein (especially if you formulate it as an open question) – what **results** you currently expect to obtain (1 paragraph).
- Clarify your approach by means of a preliminary though meaningful **outline** (not just "introduction", "main body", "conclusion" – if in doubt, describe each subsection with a short sentence).

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9   Bertolt Brecht, 'Life of Galileo', in *Collected Plays 5*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen Drama, 2015), 75.

- It can also be helpful to set out your **next steps.** Try to keep them as concrete as possible – something you could in fact act on.
- Finally, you can also provisionally list **publications** that you consider important reference points for developing your paper.

Further Resources on the Writing Process

More information and tips on the writing process can, for instance, be found here:

The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: *Brainstorming*. https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/brainstorming/.

The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: *Reorganizing Drafts*. https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/reorganizing-drafts/.

Berkeley Student Learning Center: *Pre Writing / Developing a Topic*. https://slc.berkeley.edu/writing-worksheets-and-other-writing-resources/pre-writing-developing-topic.

2.4   What Makes a Good Academic Text?

If you take away just one point from this guide and engrain it into the depths of your mind, please let it be this advice from James Pryor:

> "Pretend that your reader is **lazy, stupid, and mean**. He's lazy in that he doesn't want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean, and he doesn't want to figure out what your argument is, if it's not already obvious. He's stupid, so you have to explain everything you say to him in simple, bite-sized pieces. And he's mean, so he's not going to read your paper charitably. (For example, if something you say admits of more than one interpretation, he's going to assume you meant the less plausible thing.) "[10]

If you have this kind of reader in mind when writing your paper, you are already on a very good track indeed. You can get on an even better one if you read on.

Focus

> ♪ *Soundtrack:* Queen: <u>One Vision</u>.

Your **research objective** is the *point and purpose* and the *organising principle of* your paper, remember? Everything you do in your paper follows from and relates to it. Every step you take must earn its place in your paper by contributing to your objective. Imagine you have to defend every paragraph and every sentence against a reckless critic who wants to cut down your text:

> Can you explain why this is a **necessary** step on the way to achieving your objective?
> If not, just **leave it out**.

To do this, of course, you need a good grasp of how the individual pieces of your paper relate to your research objective – perhaps it will help you to visualise the argumentative structure of your work (→ *argument mapping*).

At least in shorter term papers and in essays, you should also always ask yourself:

> Do you pursue *one* objective throughout all of your paper? Or is there any point at which you open up a side show that actually has its own separate objective?

In the latter case, just cut it and focus all your energy on your actual task. If you want to show that you have identified interesting cross-connections that could be pursued further, you can (moderately) employ footnotes to that end.

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10   James Pryor, 'Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper', 6 September 2012, http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html.

Metadiscourse and Signposting

It is not only important that *you* know that each part of your paper contributes towards your objective and how. This is exactly what your *reader* needs to be aware of, too.

> Never leave your reader in the dark about what the exact **purpose** of something you do at a given point is within your **overall project.**

To this end, it is necessary that you not just do whatever it is you are doing, but also *tell us* what you are doing. Don't assume this is obvious anyway. Of course it is obvious to *you* because you are thinking about your paper all the time. But your job is to make sure that it likewise is obvious to someone who is just reading your paper for the very first time. (You know: lazy, stupid, and mean).

To achieve this, you have two main tools at your disposal: Firstly, you can plainly describe how your paper is structured at certain points. As a rule, you should once do this for the entire paper towards the end of your introduction (you will find an example there in the next section).

However, you can also use such meta-level remarks about the structure of your paper along the way (depending on the length of your paper) – typically, whenever you have completed a major section and are now transitioning to a new point. Consider this example:

> I now turn to the second part of this article, in which its main argument against anti-cosmopolitanism will be put forward. I will show why we should understand (3) in the weak sense (and weaker still than David Miller does), and that we should be sceptical towards basing decidedly anti-cosmopolitan conclusions on these grounds. I will begin this by saying more about how we should understand the concept of sharing a national identity.[11]

In the same way, you can explicitly clarify your intentions at points where there might be room for a misunderstanding:

> In doing so, I will engage empirical materials for illustrative purposes, resorting primarily to [...]. However, the subsequent discussion neither aims to analyse these cases comprehensively nor is it meant to provide a basis for inductive inferences about key features of far-right movements in general. Rather, I aim to illustrate how different theoretical lenses can bring to shine certain features and similarities in these cases.[12]

Oftentimes, this is done to restrict the scope of your project. In the following example, this is linked to an explanation of the argument's structure:

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11 David V. Axelsen, 'The State Made Me Do It: How Anti-Cosmopolitanism Is Created by the State', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (December 2013): 460, https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12005.

12 Moritz Schulz, "What are the key features of far-right movements today?", unpublished manuscript.

> I will not pursue these lines of argument, however. This does not mean that I think the assumptions made in the argument are unproblematic or immune to critique. Rather, I aim to show that rejecting one of the assumptions does not entail rejecting the central argument of this article. Rather, if one denies one or more of the assumptions made in the argument, this will simply give one further reason to accept my claims.[13]

The second tool you can use to give your text a transparent structure is an assortment of inconspicuous little words. In fact, you will often use them to communicate the structure of your text without paying attention to it. But you can ramp up their effectiveness by consciously paying attention to how you make logical connections and juxtapositions:

> *Contrastive comparisons*: by contrast to; on the one hand … on the other hand; in a different way; unlike X; diverging from X; while; whereas; although; …
> Matching comparisons: likewise; similarly; in the same way; in step with; …
> *Addition*: in addition; furthermore; moreover; as well as that; besides; also; too; apart from this …
> *Rebuttal*: notwithstanding; however; though; nevertheless; nonetheless; despite; but; …
> *Premises*: because; since; for; given that; considering that; seeing as; owing to; if …; under the condition that; provided that; …
> Conclusions: hence; therefore; thus; thereby; so that; because of this; consequently; then; as a result; …

You can also announce and structure a series of several points:

> Three obvious objections can be raised against this argument. Firstly, […]. Secondly, […]. Finally, […].

While it slants towards describing empirical research, you may want to take a look at the University of Manchester's Academic Phrasebank, which contains many more such standard phrases classified by different functions in your text.

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13   Axelsen, 'The State Made Me Do It', 460.

Introduction

At heart, a full-scale[14] introduction serves three purposes:

1. It makes clear **what** you are going to do (research objective and roadmap)
2. It makes clear why your project is **interesting** and **relevant.**
3. It situates your project in the **context** necessary to understand (1) and (2).

The **order** of these components is entirely up to you. However, it usually makes sense to end the introduction with the '**roadmap**' – i.e., a paragraph in which you describe the structure of your paper. Ideally, though, this 'mapping' of your work should not simply list which parts will appear in what sequence, but aim to make clear how they are *functionally* connected to each other (→ <u>Metadiscourse and Signposting</u>).

Let's take a look at an example of a very condensed introduction that nevertheless covers all three bases:

These days, most ethicists agree that at least some nonhumans have interests that are of direct moral importance. [That is to say, there are at least some nonhuman interests that make a moral claim on us. Yet with very few exceptions, both climate ethics and climate policy have operated as though only human interests should be considered in formulating and evaluating climate policy. In this paper I argue that the anthropocentrism of current climate ethics and policy cannot be justified in light of well-explored and widely accepted understandings of the relevant concepts and principles within contemporary ethics. In what follows, I first describe the ethical claims upon which my analysis rests, arguing that they are no longer controversial within contemporary ethics. Next I review work in climate ethics and policy, demonstrating the absence of consideration of nonhuman interests in both domains. Finally, I consider five possible justifications for omitting nonhuman interests in the evaluation of climate policy options, arguing that none of these arguments succeeds.[15]

In the first sentence, the author extremely briefly summarises the state of current research to the extent relevant to her project. The second sentence clarifies the meaning of a concept central to it. The third sentence establishes a relationship between the research debate from the first sentence and another debate. At the same time, it alerts us to a surprising contrast: the research gap into which this paper can fill and which makes it interesting. The fourth sentence then tells us how it will

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14 In short essays, you have to keep the introduction very short for reasons of space, so you probably cannot fulfil all three functions. Nevertheless, it is useful to ask yourself if you could somehow cover these points very briefly.
15 Katie McShane, 'Anthropocentrism in Climate Ethics and Policy', *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 40, no. 1 (2016): 189–90, https://doi.org/10.1111/misp.12055.

fill that gap: it names the central thesis (the research objective) of the text. The subsequent para-graph is the 'roadmap'.

The following example shows that you can include these central functions even in an **extremely short** introduction (like one for an essay):

> The basic message of this article is that, as far as distributive justice is concerned, *enough is enough*. In what follows, I will elaborate on this brief statement, and in so doing, mount a defence of a particular version of the principle of sufficiency. Although versions of the sufficiency principle have been defended by several authors, [*footnote supporting the claim*] it is still in need of further elaboration. My aim here is to provide a restated account of the principle that renders it invulnerable to the brunt of the forceful criticisms that have re-cently been launched against it.[16]

The first sentence states the thesis. It is narrowed down in the second sentence, which also roughly indicates the structure of the text. The third and fourth sentences relate the project to the literature and justify the necessity/relevance of the project.

As you can see from the last example, additional context and a more detailed roadmap are the first up for cuts if you need to save space. After all, there is no way you can leave out the objective of your paper and you should certainly make some moves to motivate it too.

If, on the other hand, you have a little more space at hand, you can include more **context** for your project. It is important, however, that you always do this purposefully – don't just dump accumu-lated literature, but paint a picture which your paper fits neatly into, like the cherry missing on top of the cupcake. In this sense, authors often try to present the state of research in such a way that it raises a question which then motivates of your project (making sure, of course, that the picture you paint is a reasonably plausible one of how things stand). Take a look:

> The principle of proportionality started its triumphal march through human and constitu-tional rights law roughly a half century ago. Surprisingly, however, it was only relatively re-cently that it began to attract the attention of constitutional rights theorists; [*footnote sup-porting the claim*] and even more recently, some opposition to the principle has begun to form. So there are now a number of theories trying to demonstrate that proportionality is a valuable doctrine, and there are a few attempts to show the opposite. This paper does not directly contribute to this debate but rather hopes to open up a new field of discussion by directly engaging with the critics of proportionality. Rather than making a positive case for proportionality or a negative case against it, it examines the arguments of the critics of proportionality and asks whether they make a coherent case for rejecting it.[17]

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16 Robert Huseby, 'Sufficiency: Restated and Defended', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (June 2010): 178, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2009.00338.x.
17 Kai Möller, 'Proportionality: Challenging the Critics', *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 10, no. 3 (1 July 2012): 709–10, https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/mos024.

Conclusion

Here's an actually only slightly exaggerated quip about how academic writing goes: In the introduction, you say what you are going to do. In the main part, you do it. In the conclusion you say that you have done it. The conclusion, it is sometimes said, is an introduction in the past tense.

Essentially, that's correct. In the conclusion of your paper you summarise the, well, conclusions of your argument, taking into account the way you arrived at them: Recapitulate **what** follows from your paper (which corresponds to your research objective set out in the introduction) and **how** what you have done over the course of your text should lead one to now take this conclusion to be true (or justified). Do *not* introduce any new ideas or arguments relevant to your research objective in the conclusion.

Should you have the space to do so, you can again situate your work in an appropriate **context** after this summary – e.g. by referring back to the context you provided in the introduction and thus reminding us in what respect exactly your results are interesting, or pointing out relevant implications of your findings. As always, though: If all you can think of is platitudes ("... deserves to be the subject of further research beyond the confines of this paper"), it's better to just leave it out.

The following example reflects exactly these three steps:

> This essay has provided a moral defence of the culture of justification, that is, the idea that all laws and other acts of the state that affect a person must be substantively justifiable to that person and that individuals can rely on their constitutional rights to enforce this in court. As has become clear, the culture of justification is not only an influential idea and empirically successful practice in various liberal democracies around the world; it is also morally justifiable and indeed morally obligatory. My argument to this effect has relied on three building blocks. First and foremost, the foundation of the culture of justification lies in the fundamental status of each person as a justificatory agent, that is, an agent who has a right to justification. Second, it follows from the existence and moral relevance of reasonable disagreement that the right to justification demands that any act that affects a person be (at least) reasonable. Third, the status of persons as justificatory agents, that is, agents who can demand acceptable reasons, implies that the right to justification must be institutionally protected; in other words, the existence of judicial review is required as a matter of principle.
>
> What follows? The moral appeal of the culture of justification gives, in particular, judges and public law scholars good reason to continue with the project that, as Cohen-Eliya and Porat have shown, is already in full swing in the liberal democratic world: the gradual transformation and reinterpretation of constitutional law and doctrines so as to make them consistent with the requirements of the culture of justification. This includes [...]. This development towards a culture of justification is of great moral importance: we owe it to others and to ourselves, as justificatory agents, to make it a success.[18]

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18 Kai Möller, 'Justifying the Culture of Justification', *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 17, no. 4 (31 December 2019): 1096–97, https://doi.org/10/gg2c32.

Style

There's no doubt about it – a stylistically polished text always makes for a more enjoyable read than a cumbersome barrage of word bulk. Indeed, there are scholars who succeed in writing elegant prose time and again, imbuing their texts with their personal voice and a seasoning of sharp wit. This, however, is not what you should worry about in writing your paper, so long as you make sure your text is reasonably readable. (If you want to work on your writing style, it is always a good starting point to deliberately read with an eye to style: Take note when texts seem particularly well-written to you and observe what these writers do.)

Besides such elegance, though, there is one stylistic virtue that you definitely should strive for and which you should not subordinate to other aspirations: the **clarity** of your text. Think of it this way: Fundamentally, academic research is about generating and conveying insight and knowledge – it is therefore about content, about *what* you say. But since you cannot transmit your insights telepathically, you have to communicate your ideas by wrapping them up into a package of text. Consequently, though, you should design this text in such a way that the content (which this is actually all about) is as easily accessible to the recipient as possible. If your readers have to invest their energy in peeling through the packaging of your ideas, they will waste energy that they could spend thinking about what you actually have to say. At the same time, it is in your interest to put your cards on the table as openly as possible: In the collaborative enterprise of research, you want to make it as easy as possible for others to be able to assess your ideas and respond to them efficiently so that you can make progress together.

> What makes an academic text difficult to understand should never be *how* you say something, but at most *what* it is that you are saying.

So remember James Pryor and think of the lazy, stupid, and mean reader. Or else, take the words of Karl Popper:

> "He who cannot say it plain and clear should remain silent and continue working so long until he can."[19]

A few more specific points deserve to be mentioned here:

- There is really nothing wrong with using the word "**I**" in academic writing. (Just consider the examples in this guide.) Of course, you are not supposed to write an autobiographical account of personal experiences, but that is not down to your use of a personal pronoun.

- If there is an established **technical term** that describes exactly what you are talking about or if you have defined a term for the purposes of your paper, then stick to exactly that term – even if it should appear in every other sentence. This is always preferable to creating confu-

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19   Karl Popper, *Auf der Suche nach einer besseren Welt* (München: Piper, 1984), 100; own translation (MS).

sion about whether you use a different term to mean that same thing or something different altogether.

- Avoid **platitudes** and empty phrases. If there is something in there that you really want to say, say it precisely and in your own words. Platitudes derive their supposed persuasiveness from their vagueness (there's something about them that is somehow true) and from the fact that you have simply heard them so many times that they sound familiar and therefore vaguely true. Both is essentially unscientific. Platitudes are particularly common in the introduction and conclusion: "Questions of justice have preoccupied people since the dawn of time." – "We live in an age of increasing complexity." – "Western countries have witnessed a surge in populism." Etc.

- Be very, very critical of **vague** formulations ("some", "often", "mostly", "ever more", "one does" ...). In particular, question fuzzy categories ("Western states", "modern democracies", "populist rhetoric") and normally avoid impersonal and passive statements if there is an **agent** ("it is argued", "philosophers say", "there are doubts", ... – who is arguing, saying, doubting there?).

- You wouldn't think that this needs to be mentioned – but experience teaches otherwise: pay attention to **spelling**, correct **sentence structure,** complete sentences (with a main clause, with a verb, not breaking off in the middle), **punctuation**, lexical mistakes. If your paper contains plenty of language mistakes, your corrector will quickly get the impression that you didn't even consider it worth the effort of reading it through again before submitting. At the very least, run your word processor's automatic spell checker once. Ideally, give your text to someone to proofread.

Examples

Perhaps you remember that in school you were once told that an argument consists of a thesis, a justification and an example. Strictly speaking, this is nonsense, as we have seen (→ 2.2). There is **no need** to mechanically include examples as an end in themselves. However, well-chosen examples can certainly fulfil various valuable functions in your text.

On the one hand, examples can themselves be **part of your argument**. If, for instance, you are arguing against the thesis that it is always morally wrong to kill people, it is enough to provide one example in which this is not the case. The example then constitutes the counter-argument to said thesis.

On the other hand, examples can **illustrate** an idea and thereby help in making something clear to your reader (like the example in the previous paragraph). This is particularly useful where a point is otherwise made in very abstract terms. After all, you want to make sure that your readers have exactly the same thing in mind as you do – an example can help to attain this. Conversely, you can also use examples to isolate a clear instance of a phenomenon that you then want to describe in abstract terms, perhaps drawing out a particular aspect of the example. As, well, an example consider the following quote, in which the author approaches an analysis of what it means for two people to be equals *in certain respects* through an analogous example:

> I ask: 'Is the book any good?' You reply: 'You mean good qua treatise on political philosophy, or good qua birthday present?' I reply: 'I mean none of that. I just mean: is it good?' At this point, it would be reasonable of you to respond that you do not really know what I am asking. There is a distinction between predicative adjectives like 'red' and attributive adjectives like 'good' (Geach, 1956). Something is not red only qua being of a certain kind, e.g. a car, but something is good only qua being of a certain kind, as your reasonable request for clarification in our imaginary dialogue manifests. Something analogous is true about 'relating as equals'. Relating as equals' makes no sense unless we presuppose a certain understanding of the dimension on which we relate as equals.[20]

Further Resources on Academic Writing

Arguably, this guide can only highlight a few important points about academic writing – others have more space and more experience in explaining all the details. So if you want to work on your writing skills, it is well worth taking a look at the advice of others. For example, the Harvard Writing Center offers a relatively brief but excellent guide:

> Chudnoff, Elijah. 2007. *A Guide to Philosophical Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University: The Writing Center.

Extensive collections of materials are also available from:

> The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/.

> Harvard College Writing Center: Strategies for Essay Writing. https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/strategies-essay-writing.

> Berkeley Student Learning Center: Writing Worksheets and Other Writing Resources. https://slc.berkeley.edu/writing-worksheets-and-other-writing-resources.

> Pryor, James. 2012. "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper". http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html.

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20 Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, *Relational egalitarianism: living as equals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 63.

2.5 How to Cite Correctly and Keep Track of Your Sources

> ♪ *Soundtrack:* The Beatles: With A Little Help From My Friends.
> ♪ *Soundtrack:* Wings: The Note You Never Wrote.

Reference Managers

Unless you have masochistic tendencies, start using a reference management software. Of course, you can also move PDF files back and forth in folders and subfolders for each seminar and paper, collect quotes with citations in a document by hand and copy references back and forth. How likely is it, though, that sooner or later something will get mixed up, you will no longer know where a quote came from, or you will not find a file again because it is in the wrong folder or has a weird file name? If you are in any way interested in taking a sensible and systematic approach to academic work (and why would you be reading this otherwise?), use a reference manager.

Such software offers you a database in which you can store all your texts and link them to files on your computer. In contrast to files in folders, however, you already have all the bibliographic inform‐ation stored, you can run flexible searches, assign texts to thematic collections, assign tags, store notes on texts and, above all, have citations and bibliographies output in the citation style of your choice – either by copy & paste or directly into your document via a plug-in for your word processor. Another advantage: this way, you can gradually build up your own literature database, which you can always refer to further down the line in your studies.[21]

The most common programmes for this are:

- Citavi (commercial, available via university licence; Windows, Web)
- Zotero (Open source; Windows, Mac, Linux)
- EndNote (commercial; Windows, Mac)
- Mendeley (commercial; Windows, Max, Linux)

Take some time to set up your working environment properly and familiarise yourself a little with the software – you will benefit from it for the rest of your studies. For each of the above-mentioned programmes, you will find instructions and tips en masse on the Internet.

The University Library offers you information and even personal training for Zotero and Citavi:

Reference management with Zotero or Citavi

A good guide on setting up Zotero, including particularly useful add-ons, can be found here:

Tutorial: The Best Reference Manager Setup (Zotero + ZotFile + Cloud Storage)

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21 For the same reason, if it seems conceivable to you that you might want to draw on the knowledge you have accumu‐lated in this way once you have finished your degree, you should consider whether you want to become dependent on a university licence or whether might prefer open source software.

Citation Styles

The **purpose** of citations in academic writing is to enable readers to keep track of which other texts or sources of information you refer to. To this end, you must firstly clearly *identify* these texts and provide all the information necessary for your readers to *find* the publication themselves. Citations and reference lists that fulfil these purposes can be designed in thousands of ways. Citation styles exist so that you no longer have to rack your brains over this and can reliably get it done in a uniform way.

Which citation style you follow frankly doesn't matter at all. (As long as it's nothing wholly exotic that you've dug up or made up somewhere. See how it's done in your course readings). The important point is that you follow your chosen style **consistently** and include **all the necessary bibliographic information**. If you use a reference manager and apply the correct publication type in each case, you should hardly ever have to waste any thoughts on this.

If you are in doubt about how to cite a certain type of source correctly, look online for style guides or manuals for your chosen citation style and follow the guidelines provided therein. If you're in utter despair about it, ask your librarian.

A Few Common Stumbling Blocks

☐ Exactly like direct citations, indirect[22] citations[23] should always include a **specific page number** or alternative reference (chapter, section, timestamp, etc.) – unless you are really referring to the entire work (e.g. to a basic idea underlying an entire paper).

☐ The point of citing sources, as I said, is to make transparent where you got what information and whose achievements you are leveraging at which point. To this end, your citations must be **specific**. If you add an indirect citation after a long paragraph going on about some topic, it remains completely unclear what the citation refers to: the entire paragraph? Or just the last sentence? Which are your own ideas and which come from that source? Normally, the appropriate place for an indirect citations is at the end of a sentence before the full stop. If the citation does not refer to the content of the whole sentence, place the citation at the end of the sub-clause or the keyword in question.

☐ In matters of citation, there is no cosmological gulf between research literature and **websites**. No matter where you get a piece of information, it is a source. You must cite all sources and all cited sources go in your bibliography – with all available bibliographic information. Even texts on the internet often have authors, titles, and dates! (If they don't, you might want to reconsider whether it really is a reliable source).

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22 *Indirect* quotations paraphrase or refer to ideas from a source in your own words. *Direct quotations* are literal quotations (in inverted commas).

23 A *citation* is the mentioning of the source in your text (e.g., "(Jones 2022, 243)"), not the *reference* listed at the end of your paper in what is sometimes called the *bibliography*.

2.6   What Is Plagiarism?

> ♪ *Soundtrack:* Paul McCartney: That Was Me.

Strictly speaking, plagiarism consists in just this:

> You leverage **another person's work** in your text without making this transparent, such that a reader gets the **impression you did it yourself**.

Note: Leveraging others' work does not have to consist in copying text – it can also consist in adopting original ideas or, for example, copying the exact outline of a paper on a similar topic. Also, the above definition does not include *intent*: plagiarism, in the strict sense, can basically exist without you trying to deceive anyone. If you simply forget to include citations for indirect quotations, this may qualify as plagiarism.

> As a general rule, **provide sources** for anything you haven't thought of or found out yourself.

There is one exception to this, but you should interpret it carefully: That which is considered common knowledge in the context in which you are writing can be asserted without supporting evidence. Usually these are facts about current events (e.g. who the current US president is). It may also be that within the research debate you are engaging in your paper, certain facts are considered common knowledge (e.g. that John Rawls is a key figure in modern political theory).

Formal errors in your citations and references that do not give the impression that someone else's work is your own can also get you in the vicinity of plagiarism – for instance, if you make a direct quotation in inverted commas and then forget to include the citation, or if a literature reference is so incomplete that it is not clear whom or which publication you have cited. Just signalling that something comes from elsewhere is not enough: to give due credit, you must clearly identify the source.

As mentioned in the previous section, one common mistake is to leave open what a given citation refers to in your text – e.g. by dropping an indirect citation at the end of a long paragraph. Now what does that refer to? The paragraph? The last sentence? Something in between? Of course, it may happen that you reproduce the content of another publication over a longer section of your text. In this case, just make that explicit: "Müller (1990, 34-36) describes topic X as follows: [...]" Or in a footnote: "In this paper, I follow the analysis of Marx (2003) in his account of X.

> Always make it clear **what exactly** is not coming from you and **where exactly** you are taking it from.

All such deficiencies represent serious formal errors in your work which you must make sure to avoid and which will have a significant impact on your grade – in many cases, they will cause you to fail.

A more narrowly defined category is that of 'plagiarisms' that constitute **attempts at deception** according to Examination Regulations (like cheating in an exam). Obviously, these depend on the assumption that there is an intention to deceive. Here, the Examination Regulations (§13 subsec. 4) stipulate: "*Ein Plagiat liegt insbesondere vor, wenn bei einer Ausarbeitung maßgebliche Teile des Inhaltes aus anderen Werken ohne Angabe der Quelle übernommen oder übersetzt werden.*" (Please note that 'insbesondere' leaves the correctors and the examination board room for interpretation in individual cases).

2.7　What Should the Document Look Like?

> ♪ *Soundtrack:* All: Just Perfect.

On the one hand, please be aware: the time to legitimately worry about formatting your work is a point in time by which you have already done a lot else. You should be far more concerned about the contents of your paper than about any such formalities. On the other hand, it is also true that precisely because formalities do not require any special effort, there is no good reason why they should not be perfect. Sloppiness is evidence simply of: sloppiness.

In general, always follow the **instructions given by your instructor,** if any. If there are none, you can assume that your document should look **neat** and be **reader-friendly** – no more, no less. Just start with a document as your word processor formats it by default and make improvements as you see fit, if necessary. Think of how published professional texts look like – you should know some.

As a rule of thumb, the following are good ideas: justified text with automatic hyphenation. Emphasised subheadings, differentiated according to outline levels (use your word processor's formatting styles for this). Automatic pagination in the header or footer. For tables and figures, a short title above or below is common, numbered if there are several figures (Fig. 1, 2, ...; Tab. 1, 2, ...). If you hand in a print copy, leave space for annotations of your corrector by using a 1.5 or double line spacing and wider margins on one side (3.5-4 cm).

It is an excellent idea to create a **template** for your paper that you can then use again later. If necessary, just look online for tutorials for your word processor – you'll find plenty of them. Learning the basic ropes of some word processor will definitely pay off in the long run.

If you hand in your work **digitally**, always hand it in as a PDF file. Make sure that the PDF file looks the way you expected it to. If you are handing in a **print copy**, make sure that nothing gets lost or mixed up – the paper should somehow be held together in a way that does not restrict readability (e.g. by text disappearing in the fold). Please do not waste money on expensive bindings (before your dissertation) – a filing strip or stapler will do the job just fine.

2.8   What Belongs in Your Paper Besides Your Text?

> ♪ *Soundtrack:* Louis Armstrong: When The Saints Go Marching In.

The same that goes for formatting likewise applies here: Do as your instructor tells you. As long as you are not given specific instructions, though, it is standard practice to include the following:

- **Title page / cover sheet:** Optional, common especially for longer term papers. At least the following must be included (whether on a separate page or not): the title of your paper (or the assigned essay question / topic), your full name, your student number (Matrikelnummer), the title of the course, the term, the name of the instructor (preferably spelt correctly), the date of submission. It is *not* necessary to include your full contact details here.

- **Table of contents:** Include a properly formatted table of contents (on a separate page; preferably created automatically) in case it actually helps to find one's way around your paper. This is not the case if your term paper features three sections only or it is a two-page essay.

- **List of figures, list of tables:** Typically unnecessary, unless you actually have a lot of figures/ tables.

- **List of abbreviations:** Typically unnecessary, unless you are working with a confusing amount of abbreviations. Otherwise, simply list abbreviations in brackets or in a footnote when first mentioned.

- **Main body of your paper**, including headings and footnotes.

- **Appendices:** It may happen that you want to include additional materials beyond your main text in an appendix – e.g. a larger graphic that would disrupt the flow of the text; the original text of a passage you have quoted in your own translation or, in rare exceptional cases, further elaborations on a certain point that do not essentially belong to your actual paper (roughly likely a long footnote). If you have several appendices, give them subheadings.

- **References**: The references section (or, loosely speaking, bibliography) lists *all* and *only those* publications / sources that you have cited (directly or indirectly), sorted alphabetically by last name (and secondarily by year of publication). The exact layout depends on the citation style you use. If you use a reference manager, you can usually have these inserted automatically. (However, you should still check them for errors.) It is not common practice (in our field) to subdivide references by publication types. However, if there is a particular reason for subdividing the bibliography (e.g. separation between scientific literature and analysed primary sources, or perhaps court decisions), you are free to do so.

- **Declaration of authorship**: As per the Examination Regulations (§5 Subsec.5), you must include a written declaration at the end of your paper stating that you are the sole author of the present paper and that no sources other than those identified have been used in producing it. Please note: If your instructor has informed you that essays will be graded anonymously, *do not* include your name or signature in this section or else upload it as a separate file.

Of the above, only the main text of your paper counts towards **length limits**: the body text including headings and footnotes. When such a limit is specified as a word count, indicate the word count of exactly these elements (make sure to include the footnotes) either on the cover page / at the beginning or at the end of the paper. Unless otherwise specified, assume any length specifications to apply *strictly*. You must assume that anything exceeding the given maximum length could not be taken into account by your corrector or may otherwise result in penalties on your grade.

3 Some Classic Types of Papers

3.1 Essays versus Term Papers

Perhaps you think of the term "essay" as a journalistic or literary genre, presenting elegant or witty musing of the kind written by Montaigne or printed in a literary magazine. For our purposes, just get that out of your head.

An (academic, theoretical, philosophical) essay presents a thesis and provides reasons why one should believe it to be true. In principle, then, an essay is no different from other types of **academic texts –** and from classic term papers.

The most striking difference between the texts we normally call "term papers" and those we call "essays" is their **length**: essays are shorter. Consequently, essays are necessarily focused on the bare bones of your line of argument (e.g., providing less context on the literature) and usually make only a single overall point. In a longer term paper, on the other hand, you have more space to con-textualise your topic and devise a project that might proceed in several more independent steps.

However, do not make the mistake of assuming that a shorter text means **less work.** The challenge in shorter texts is precisely that you have to limit yourself to an argument you can convincingly deliver within these constraints. You need to fill the space you avail of with exactly that which is necessary for getting to your objective and make it drip with clearly presented substantial content – no vague tangents and side projects, no beating around the bush. (Which, of course, also goes for a term paper!) If you take this to heart, even a short essay will offer you both a challenge on par with a term paper and the opportunity to say something relevant despite its brevity.

Generally, both essays and term papers are not free-floating art forms contrived for the torture chambers of higher education – at their core, they are nothing more than **academic texts** of the kind you find in journals or book chapters. And such texts should be (increasingly) familiar to you, given that you constantly read them in your courses.

The relatively unconstrained form of academic publications, which allow you to unfold an inde-pendently developed project, is mimicked most closely by classic term papers (→ 3.4) and final dis-sertations. There are a few special rules that apply to different types of essays. The main difference consists in whether you are assigned a specified question or thesis (→ 3.3) or need to develop one of your own in response to a text (→ 3.2). For each of these **three classic types** of **papers**, you will find some further information and tips below. Needless to say: if in doubt, do as your instructor says.

3.2   The Explain-and-Evaluate Essay

In this type of essay, your task is to take some argument from a text or debate and first **reconstruct** that argument (the *explaining* part) and then **do something with it** on your own – that is, offer a response to the argument that provides some added value to someone interested in the subject matter of the original text. Typically, you will evaluate the argument and point out the implications of your evaluation (thus the *evaluating* part). Both parts should, however, together form a **single project**: The central thesis you defend in your essay, which covers your reaction to the argument, should render it necessary to first reconstruct the argument from the text. (For instance, this would be the case if your essay raises an objection to an argument: in order to do that, you obviously first need to present the argument you aim to reject.)

Often you can choose freely which argument to discuss, but there may also be certain constraints – e.g. to pick an argument from one of the assigned readings.

It is important that you pick an actual **argument** (→ 2.2) and that you pick **one.** A *thesis* is not an argument, but at best the conclusion of an argument. A *theory* is not an argument, but usually a complex structure of different theses and arguments. Remember: an argument (in this case, an already completely reconstructed one) looks like this:

> "The argument for a right to the freedom to use drugs might be summarized thus:
> Adults have a right to the freedom to live as seems good to themselves (within the limits of others' rights).
> So, adults have a right to do dangerous things (provided they endanger only themselves).
> Drug use endangers only the user.
> Therefore, adults have a right to the freedom to use drugs. "[24]

Reconstructing the argument is part of the task you have to accomplish because it is quite rare for arguments to be presented as explicitly articulated as in the above example. Your task is to take what you find in the text and transform into the most clear and explicit statement of the argument given therein. In the course of this, you will likely need to make clarifications that require an interpretation of the source text.

When reconstructing an argument, you must make sure to interpret others **charitably.** This is to say: you always try to interpret others in such a way that what they are saying seems as sensible and convincing as possible – of course within the confines of a *plausible* interpretation of their choice of words. Always keep in mind that whatever they are expressing here seemed like a good idea to that other person; and chances are they are not simply much dumber than you are. (They can still be wrong, of course.) If you take this to heart and criticise a charitable interpretation of their view, your position is all the stronger for it: you show that *even the best possible* interpretation of this idea runs into problems.

In your subsequent second step, you are supposed to **"do something"** with the argument you reconstructed. Here are a few option for what that might entail:

- You offer your own counter-argument against the reconstructed argument. That is to say:

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24   Smith, 'Drugs, Morality and the Law', 234.

- You argue that one of the premises is false.
- You argue that the conclusion does not follow from the premises.
- *Only in the case of inductive arguments:* You present an argument against the conclusion of the initial argument that speaks more strongly against it than the latter speaks for it.

- You present an objection put forward by others and defend the reconstructed argument against it.
- Based on your reconstruction, you point out some structural problem in the argument and
  - suggest a modification that fits the original context just as well but avoids the problem or
  - show that the argument fails as a result of this and that obvious modifications do not seem desirable.
- You suggest a modification of the argument that would make it even more interesting or powerful.
- You present an example or thought experiment that questions the plausibility of the argument.
- You present an example that makes clear in a new way why the argument is convincing or superior to similar arguments.
- You point out a parallel between the reconstructed argument and an argument from a different context, which provides an interesting new perspective on the former.

Example

> *Beginning of a possible essay (on the somewhat longer side) about the argument quoted above:*
> While legal prohibition of drugs is firmly established and widely accepted in most liberal democracies, the justification of such legal practices is well-known to pose a challenge to liberal political theorists: Arguments building on Mill's *harm principle* seem to expose such laws as founded on impermissible paternalism. In this essay, I will first present an argument to this effect put forward by Smith (2002). My aim will be to raise an objection to it which is nonetheless compatible with basic tenets of liberalism. To this end, I set out to show that the underlying assumptions of the argument are unduly individualistic: The liberal conception of a political community as being grounded in relations of social co-operation entails that individuals have some duty to contribute towards the maintenance of collective goods. This gives rise to a prima facie legitimate interest on behalf of the community to prevent individuals from choices that would render them incapable of fulfilling such contributory duties.

Further resources

▶❙ Cullison, Andrew. *Present, Explain, and Evaluate – Writing a Short Philosophy Paper.* 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glu3QCi8Wjk.

Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter and Robert Fogelin. *Understanding Arguments: An Introduction to Informal Logic*. Australia: Cengage Learning, 2015. ***Especially*** *ch. 5: Deep Analysis*.

Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter and Robert Fogelin. *Think Again: How to Reason and Argue*. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0jCKPRrv1HGlxvsKP0KzmKuPfTGZcoyZ. ***Especially***: *3.4 Sharpen edges, 3.5 Organize parts, 3.7 Fill in gaps.*

3.3 The Thesis-or-Question Essay

Another option is that you will be **assigned** a thesis or question as the subject of your essay. These assignments usually refer to central aspects of the seminar, often you have a choice between several options.

At first, this may sound convenient: you are spared the work of finding your own research objective. But that's only half true: typically, these essay topics are quite **broad** and function in such a way that they raise a specific **problem** and provide you with an **impetus for discussion.** On the one hand, this means that they are not (as they might be in an exam) questions with *one correct answer* that you have to extract from your readings. Rather, think of these topics as opening up a certain thematic space of options you can then go on to exploit (→ *What Is the Point of a Term Paper in the First Place?*).

On the other hand, this entails that you still have to *interpret* and *sharpen* or *narrow down* the assigned topic in order to arrive at the specific objective you aim for by means of your essay. Your task is to show that you **understand which problem** is being invoked in the assignment and to then unfold an **independent line of argument** so as to say: With regard to *this problem*, I will here make *the following specific point*. The former also involves accurately identifying the context in which the problem is situated, what concepts or theories you should make use of in addressing it, and what relevant connections you can establish to other issues.

Perhaps a few examples of essay topics from past courses can give you a better idea:

> 1. "If one takes the right to justification seriously, all political decisions become questions of justice." Discuss.
> 2 In a hypothetical political community that fully realises the principle of justification, would there ever be votes on political issues?
> 3 Are statements about democratic virtues always empirical hypotheses about causal relations?
> 4. "All fundamental rights adjudication can be reduced to the issue of whether the exercise of state authority over persons subject to it can be justified in the case at hand." Discuss.
> 5. Is it conceivable that an act carried out based on racist intentions could be justified on general and reciprocal grounds towards those affected? Consider implications of your answer.

Even if this type of essay leaves you with some room for interpretation, it is of course also important that your essay properly fits the assigned topic. Here, the criterion is: Does your essay clearly offer a response to a **plausible interpretation** of the assignment? Would someone familiar with the problem addressed in the assignment recognise your essay as a sensible response to it?

Therefore, if you are not completely sure whether your essay exactly fits the bill, or if you consider the essay topic ambiguous, you should make explicit how you **interpret** the topic and, if necessary, justify **why** you interpret it that way. This justification should be **plausible –** do not distort the topic until it fits whatever you just wanted to write about in the first place. If you are puzzled by the topic as you understand it and it does not seem to align with course contents, you should take a step back and reconsider whether you really understand it correctly.

Example

> *Possible beginning of an essay on question (4):*
> The renewed prominence of the concept of citizenship in political theory since the 1990s (Kymlicka and Norman 1994, 352) has also drawn the attention of normative democratic theory to the question of what makes *good* democratic citizens (Galston 1991, ch. 10) – the question of *democratic virtues*. Meaningful discussion of potential answers to this question, though, is predicated on understanding what kind of claim exactly is entailed by a thesis of the form (T): "*X is a democratic virtue.*" In this essay, I will first explain why it may initially seem that (T) is necessarily a hypothesis about a cause-effect relation between X and the quality of a democratic system. I will go on to argue, however, that democratic virtues that are conceptually entailed by a given understanding of democracy present conceivable can-didates too, while not being based on empirical cause-effect relations beyond premises in-herent in the relevant theory of democracy.

Further resources

▶❚ Wolff, Jonathan. *How to write a philosophy essay*. 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwd5wWY5TmM.

3.4   Term Papers

When you are required to write a "term paper" for a course, you can as rough guide imagine the following: A somewhat longer paper (depending on the course, rarely less than 10 or more than 30 pages) in which you come up with your own research objective and how to achieve it, largely free of specific constraints. Filling in this blank space and designing your project also constitutes an integral part of your task – even more so than in the types of essays mentioned above, in which you will be provided with certain starting points.

This, however, entails that irrespective of a specific course there is little more to say about term papers beyond the general advice we have given in this guide so far: you need an interesting and relevant research objective (→ 2.1) and should achieve it by means of compelling arguments (→ 2.2). You will need to find ideas for that (→ 2.3). Essentially, your paper should serve to demonstrate what you are capable of (→ 1.1).

This blank canvas provides you with valuable freedom to pursue your own interests. At the same time, it can seem intimidating. However, as already mentioned above, there is no need for that: term papers are essentially academic texts of the kind you are familiar with from journals or book chapters. Above all, this means that you will always have two chief sources of inspiration and orientation for your own papers:

- In most courses,[25] the assigned readings will familiarise you with texts written in the contemporary academic debate on the course topic anyway. This usually provides you with a very good starting point: after all, your instructor has chosen these texts because they fit exactly with the aims of the course and meet a high quality standard.

- Additionally, you can always search for journal articles or book chapters in the vicinity of course topics or specifically in your area of interest. Perhaps the further readings provided in the syllabus are a starting point here. If you do your own literature search, you can use the course readings for cross-checking: Do the texts you intend to use read roughly like the texts chosen by your instructor? If you are not sure, just ask your instructor about it.

So, for the most part, it should be easy for you to get an idea of what kind of text your term paper should basically be. Perhaps, however, this advice still sounds unfortunately abstract to you – in this case, we would like to lay out a few more examples of successful research projects below. This selection is, of course, largely arbitrary and not meant as a schematic list of certain prototypes – but if you don't want to head off on your own right away, you may be able to get a first impression here of what doing "political theory" may refer to.

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25   Seminars that deal with historical texts are an exception here. If you read Kant, you should not, of course, write like Kant.

Normative Political Theory

📖 *Michael Blake: Distributive Justice, State Coercion, and Autonomy*

Let's take a look at how Michael Blake lays out his project in the introduction of this paper:[26]

> Liberalism has ==difficulty with== the fact of state borders. Liberals are, ==on the one hand==, committed to moral equality, so that the simple fact of humanity is sufficient to motivate a demand for equal concern and respect. Liberal principles, ==on the other hand==, are traditionally applied only within the context of the territorial state, which seems to place an arbitrary limit on the range within which liberal guarantees will apply. This difficulty is particularly strong in the context of distributive justice; state boundaries, after all, often divide not simply one jurisdiction from another, but the rich from the poor as well. Allowing these boundaries to determine distributive shares seems to place an almost feudal notion of birthright privilege back into the heart of liberal theory.

Blake identifies a *problem*: liberal theorists usually want to say two things that seem to be in strong tension with one another. This problem, which Blake intends to address, warrants the *relevance* of his paper. Liberal theories of justice (in the tradition of John Rawls) constitute an extremely influential and large strand of that debate. If they face a problem, then many a political theorist faces one.

> This difficulty ==has led many== philosophers to argue that some revision of liberal theory is necessary. These proposals frequently ==involve either== the demand that liberalism focus on previously neglected particularistic commitments, ==or== the demand that it abandon such local concerns and endorse a cosmopolitan vision of distributive justice.

Now we are being told how everyone else has reacted to the problem so far: There are two kinds of solutions discussed in the debate;[27] both are based on somehow modifying liberal theories of justice in such a way that the problem no longer arises. With this, Blake has finished drawing the picture in which he wants to situate his project. His project being this:

> ==What I want to do in== this article is identify ==a different way in== which liberalism might deal with the worries created by the fact of state borders. ==My argument is that== a globally impartial liberal theory is not incompatible with distinct principles of distributive justice applicable only within the national context. This is true, however, ==not because== we care more about our fellow countrymen than we do about outsiders, ==but because== the political and legal institutions we share at the national level create a need for distinct forms of justification. [...] The strategy I employ seeks to endorse ==the idea that== we can defend principles of sufficiency abroad and principles of distributive equality at home-because these principles can be understood as distinct implications of impartial principles in distinct institutional

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> contexts. That is, the ==solution of the difficulty== noted above is to be found not in a search for justified partiality, but in the interpretation of impartiality itself.

There is a *third way of* resolving the problem, which has not been adequately considered in the debate so far, and which should allow us to advocate *both* stronger duties to fellow citizens *and* universal liberal principles. The thesis that a third solution with the above consequences is conceptually possible and plausible is Blake's *research objective*. This goal is *interesting* and *relevant* because it claims to reveal a blind spot in the research debate by offering a solution to a pressing theoretical problem that would also have far-reaching practical consequences (regarding the obligations of wealthy states towards poorer ones).

📖 *Simon Caney: Climate Change and Non-Ideal Theory*

> Climate change ==poses severe threats to== human and non-human life. ==However==, the response to it from political leaders, and from the public at large, has been unimpressive. [*... short illustration ...]* In short, there is an unwillingness to comply with the kinds of responsibilities that are required to avoid dangerous climate change.
> This poses an ==important question==: what should agents do in the face of existing non-compliance and anticipated future non-compliance? This question is obviously of immense ==practical relevance==. It is also a ==complex== question for it is possible to respond to non-compliance in a number of very different ways.

In this introduction[28] Caney precisely delineates the objective of his text and explicitly makes a case for its relevance. The *problem* he addresses is this: how should agents respond when others do not do their duties of justice with respect to climate change? An answer to this problem is *relevant* because real agents (e.g. governments) are indeed facing it, the stakes are high, and it is the normative political theory claims to have something to say about such problems. Additionally, it is theoretically *interesting* because the right answer is not obvious and there is need for discussion.

> ==My aim in this chapter is== to identify all the different options available. I argue that there are six distinct kinds of response, and I seek to elaborate each in turn (Sections 1.3-1.8). ==Any non-ideal theory of climate ethics must== have as its first step an account of the different ways in which one might deal with non-compliance. This chapter seeks to ==supply such an account==.

However, Caney now does *not* aim to solve the problem he presented. Rather, he narrows down the scope of his project to a research objective that he can achieve in this paper: He wants to develop a typology of *possible* responses to the problem that will provide a *useful* starting point for further theorising, which will then carry on identifying the *correct* responses. So he has to prove two things to us in his paper: That the options he proposes plausibly carve up the logical space of possible re-

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28   All quotes in this section: Simon Caney, 'Climate Change and Non-Ideal Theory', in *Climate Justice in a Non-Ideal World*, ed. Clare Heyward and Dominic Roser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21–22, https://doi.org/ 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198744047.003.0002.

sponses to the problem. And that this conceptualisation is useful for the ultimate identification of the required response.

> Having outlined the different ways of responding to non-compliance it would be unhelpful to say nothing whatsoever about the normative question of how one might evaluate these options. In Section 1.9, therefore, I outline a methodology for evaluating the different responses, and set out the combination of responses that I take to be most promising. These proposals, however, stand in need of much more argument and evidence than I can supply here. They are intended as a provisional statement of normative hypotheses to be explored and assessed.

Caney will also briefly address the criteria by which a complete theory might pick the correct response, and which options are most likely to meet such criteria. Note, however, that this is *no longer* part of his actual research objective: Caney does not claim that he will *show* what the correct answer is (that would be a substantive thesis). Rather, this outlook places his result back in the context in which it is relevant and provides an argument for the *methodological* component of his research objective: He wants to illustrate how his developed typology can be theoretically *useful*.

Where to find some more

In case you want to look for further inspiration on your own, renowned journals publishing normative political theory include *Philosophy & Public Affairs; Journal of Political Philosophy; Public Affairs Quarterly;* or *Ethics & International Affairs.*

Positive Political Theory[29]

📖 *John Dryzek and Christian List: Social Choice Theory and Deliberative Democracy: A Reconciliation*

At heart, papers in positive political theory are no different from normative ones. Let us take a look at how Dryzek and List present their research problem, thesis, and approach in their introduction:[30]

> In the past decade the theory of democracy has been dominated by two very different approaches. Within democratic theory as conventionally defined the strongest current is now deliberative. For deliberative democrats, the essence of democratic legitimacy is the capacity of those affected by a collective decision to deliberate in the production of that decision. Deliberation involves discussion in which individuals are amenable to scrutinizing and changing their preferences in the light of persuasion (but not manipulation, deception or coercion) from other participants. Claims for and against courses of action must be justified to others in terms they can accept. Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, respectively the most influential continental and Anglo-American political philosophers of the late twentieth century, have both identified themselves as deliberative democrats. Deliberative democrats are uniformly optimistic that deliberation yields rational collective outcomes.

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29 Johannes Marx and Simon Scheller contributed the present section.
30 All subsequent quotes: John S. Dryzek and Christian List, 'Social Choice Theory and Deliberative Democracy: A Reconciliation', *British Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 1 (2003): 1–2.

Right in the first sentence Dryzek and List sketch a big picture: democratic theory is dominated by two traditions. On the one hand, there are deliberative theories of democracy. A central and relevant version of the deliberative position is presented very briefly. Then, central authors are being named. At this point, however, we do not yet know either the theoretical opponent or the research problem. The presentation of the second tradition follows the same pattern in the next section:

> The main competing tradition is social choice theory, whose proponents generally deduce far less optimistic results. To social choice theorists, the democratic problem involves aggregation of views, interests or preferences across individuals, not deliberation over their content. From the seminal work of Kenneth Arrow onwards, it has been argued that such aggregation is bedevilled by impossibility, instability and arbitrariness. [...] This critique of democracy was radicalized by William Riker, who argued that any notion of a popular will independent of the mechanism used to aggregate preferences was untenable. Given that there is no good reason to choose any particular mechanism over any other, supposedly democratic collective choices are arbitrary, and democracy is emptied of meaning.

Social choice theory is introduced as the central theoretical counterpart here. It too is briefly presented and central theorists get named. However, we still have at best a rough idea of what the article is aiming at: It seems to be about whether a meaningful collective will can emerge in democratic processes. The next two sentences then clearly state the research problem and the thesis that the authors aim to vindicate:

> Riker's radicalization of the social-choice-theoretic critique created a chasm between the two traditions that might seem impossible to bridge. We argue that the two traditions can in fact be reconciled. Though social choice practitioners may be unaware of it, some even arguing the opposite, we argue that their theory points to the functions deliberation can perform in making collective decisions both tractable and meaningful, thus providing a crucial service to deliberative democracy.

Here, the research problem is now served on a silver platter: Deliberative approaches and social choice theory represent two central theories of democracy. Their centrality to the current debate guarantees the relevance of the topic. It seems as though these theories contradict each other in central claims and thus are irreconcilably opposed to each other. To substantiate this position, Riker, an influential scholar, is cited. In their contribution, Dryzek and List want to show that this picture is not correct and that the theoretical traditions can not only be reconciled, but that social choice theory can even add an important piece to the puzzle of a deliberative theory of democracy. In the next few sentences, they will explain how they intend to vindicate this thesis:

> The structure of this article follows the results of social choice theory, for it is these that both pose the challenges to democracy and pinpoint the locations at which deliberative responses must be sought.

But this rather general structural roadmap isn't everything. Dryzek and List now go into the thick of things and describe very precisely how they want to argue in the last section of the introduction:

> Methodologically, our arguments consist of a logical component, a normative component and an empirical-hypothetical component. The logical component takes an 'if-then' form: If condition x obtains, then, by the logic of social choice theory, meaningful collective decisions are possible. The normative component defends the claim that the constraints required for bringing about condition x are inherent in or consistent with core elements of deliberative democracy. The empirical-hypothetical component, finally, seeks to render plausible the empirical hypothesis that deliberation facilitates the emergence of condition x. While we provide empirical illustrations, more systematic testing is beyond our scope here.

This explanation of their method is admittedly somewhat unusual. It would probably be easier for you in a term paper if you simply stated the main point and the purpose of subsequent sections at this point in the introduction – like so:

> In the second section, I begin by laying out social choice theory. I will show that there is no democratic way of establishing a meaningful collective preference order. The third section then elaborates on the assumptions on which this conclusion is predicated.

Now deliberative democratic theory comes into play:

> With the help of deliberative theories of democracy, I will argue in the fourth section that the pessimistic thesis derived from social choice theory need not be held because central preconditions are not fulfilled. Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that social choice theory and deliberative theory in fact complement each other and formulate mutually supportive mechanisms of collective decision-making.

Admittedly, this is a bit more tedious and there is no problem at all with the formal version of the roadmap quoted above. However, Dryzek and List's abstract description of the argumentative structure of the paper requires that you are very clear about how the individual parts relate to one another. This is something you will only understand this clearly in the course of the writing process and you hardly ever be able to formally describe your line of argument right upfront.

📖 *Stephan Hartmann and Soroush R. Rad: Voting, deliberation and truth*

To be fair, no one will expect you to follow Dryzek and List and attempt to unify two grand theoretical traditions in a humble term paper. Our second example is therefore intended to show that a contribution to positive political theory can also work out on a smaller scale. Let us stick with the tension between deliberative democratic theory and social choice theory and take a look at the abstract of an article by Hartmann and Rad:[31]

> There are various ways to reach a group decision on a factual yes-no question. One way is to vote and decide what the majority votes for. This procedure receives some epistemolo-

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31 All subsequent quotes: Stephan Hartmann and Soroush Rafiee Rad, 'Voting, Deliberation and Truth', *Synthese* 195, no. 3 (2018): 1273, https://doi.org/10/gmxg9f.

> gical support from the Condorcet Jury Theorem. Alternatively, the group members may prefer to deliberate and will eventually reach a decision that everybody endorses-a consensus. While the latter procedure has the advantage that it makes everybody happy (as everybody endorses the consensus), it has the disadvantage that it is difficult to implement, especially for larger groups.

The subject matter is by now familiar to us: They are concerned with decision-making situations in groups that have two central characteristics: They are decisions between two alternatives and only one of the answers is true. Collective decision-making is – you guessed it – a highly relevant topic. There are essentially two basic positions (deliberative approaches and approaches based on majority voting to aggregate preferences). There are merits and problems of either side, which are briefly being mentioned. Majority voting has desirable epistemic properties (i.e. properties that bring us closer to the true answer), but the disadvantage that some actors are outvoted. Deliberative approaches that aim for consensus are probably fair (because no one is outvoted), but difficult to implement. So far, it is unclear to us at this point what the research question of the paper will be. Alas, it promptly follows suit:

> Besides, the resulting consensus may be far away from the truth. And so we ask: Is deliberation truth-conducive in the sense that majority voting is?

So they are concerned with the epistemic (= knowledge-related) dimension. They want to examine whether deliberative approaches have epistemic properties similar to those of voting procedures. Now, the argumentative structure and the thesis are presented. The latter, which consists in the answer to the research question set out in the previous quote, is simply: Yes.

> To address this question, we construct a highly idealized model of a particular deliberation process, inspired by the movie Twelve Angry Men, and show that the answer is 'yes'. Deliberation procedures can be truth-conducive just as the voting procedure is.

For present purposes, we will be content knowing that they develop a formal model for group decision-making and can thus assess the quality of deliberative processes. In the introduction of the paper, the authors also elaborate on the steps they would like to take to justify this result. In a term paper, it would be desirable for you to described the structure of your paper at this point, briefly describing the function of each section (→ 2.4.3). One final point in the abstract is of interest to us, though:

> We then explore, again on the basis of our model and using agent-based simulations, under which conditions it is better epistemically to deliberate than to vote. Our analysis shows that there are contexts in which deliberation is epistemically preferable and we will provide reasons for why this is so.

After the actual objective of the paper has been dealt with, an additional point comes into play here. Once it has been established that deliberative procedures have epistemic properties comparable to

those of voting, the actual question posed initially is ticked off. However, the authors do not stop here, but go on to discuss the conditions under which either procedure ought to be used. Strictly speaking, this is a separate question that ties in with the central question of the article. Perhaps the authors had this second aspect in mind from the beginning. Or perhaps they did not and it only occurred to them in the course of working on the paper. What matters is that at this point they do not describe how they came up with the second question, but pitch it as the natural next step within the same project – just as though this paper could never have looked any different.

The aim of this article is therefore to develop a concrete model that serves to examine the theoretical arguments mentioned at the beginning. For this purpose, different democratic decision-making procedures are represented in a model. In order to tackle such questions, positive political theory often resorts to formal methods such as institutional economics, game theory, or agent-based modelling.

Comparing the two examples in this section, note that both pairs of authors work in the same subject area (democratic decision-making), but aim to gain insights on different levels: While Dryzek and List take a broad look at major theories in the field and try to reconcile two of those, Hartmann and Rad try to take a closer look at specific mechanisms and draw conclusions about their potential applications. Choosing an appropriate perspective on a given subject matter is one of the central challenges you face in crafting your term paper (→ .1).

Where to find some more

If you want to look for further sources of inspiration on your own: Renowned journals in which you can find articles in positive political theory are, for example, the *Journal of Theoretical Politics; Public Choice* or the *American Political Science Review*. However, there are no clear flagship journals specifically dedicated to positive political theory. Occasionally, you will find publications in this subject area by economists or philosophers (for instance, in *Synthese*), or in more narrowly specialised journals (such as *Social Choice*).

Side note: What distinguishes positive political theory from empirical research?

If you are to write a paper in political theory, it should of course be a paper that fits this sub-field of political science. *Normative* papers are relatively easy to distinguish from empirical ones, such as those you would write in comparative politics, international relations, or political sociology. Perhaps, though, this distinction does not appear quite so straightforward in the case of *positive* political theory.

Roughly speaking, this is because it just isn't straightforward: when political theorists set out to describe and explain political phenomena, their research will be situated on a continuum with empirical political science rather than on one side of a clear boundary. Most of the time, however, at least one of two broad distinctive criteria applies:

- The research objective of the paper is *theory-oriented* rather than empirical. For example, you do not want to explain an empirical case on the basis of a theory, but you analyse some given case in order to find or say something about a general theory about cases of this kind.

- You achieve your research objective by means of *non-empirical methods* – e.g. conceptual or argumentative analysis. You are, roughly speaking, uncovering something in a way that

does not require you to leave your desk and look at things 'out there' in the world. For example, you do not ask why political actor A holds view X, but what X means or what follows from holding view X.

As a rule, though, you do not need to make this assessment all on your own: Firstly, your instructor will have provided you with some guidance as to what can count as political theory in this field by choosing the course topic and the contents you have covered therein. Secondly, when discussing your term paper project, your instructor will alert you to potential problems.

History of Political Thought

Roughly speaking, projects in the history of (political) philosophy are characterised by the fact that they primarily try to learn something about *the text* (or an author, a tradition of thought, a certain historical concept) and not about that which the text itself *is about*. So, for example, you are not asking how we should understand freedom (which would be a normative question), but what *John Stuart Mill's understanding of freedom is,* or how *the concept of freedom* changed between the Enlightenment and German idealism.

Of course, all manner of things could be said about what someone said or thought about something. But to make it an interesting and relevant project, you still need a hook for what you want to find out about it. There are many possible ones. Roughly speaking, though, you will mostly find three broad templates in the literature:

- *Text-immanent interpretation:* Your concern is what story we tell about a particular thinker (or a text, a tradition, etc.). Your claim is: Normally we conceive of X in this-and-that way, but in fact we should correct our perspective and understand X like this.

- *Interpretation through conceptual history:* You take a particular concept that plays an important role in a text to be interpreted (or the work of an author or tradition) and try to improve our understanding of the text by a better understanding of the meaning of that concept *in that text* – because it means something different here than elsewhere (e.g. in our times or in the texts of others). Usually this is done in a comparative manner: A's and B's writings on X are usually construed as though they were talking about one and the same thing. However, if we look more closely at how the term X was used in these different contexts, we realise that A and B are not actually talking about the same thing and we need to differentiate these seeming X-theories.

- *Interpretation by transfer:* You interpret a historical text X by examining what it implies about topics that were not directly covered by it – especially those that are relevant in the current academic debate. In other words, you try to use X as a source of ideas for current research. In doing so, however, your focus remains on the interpretation of X, rather than drawing on it merely as a cue for heading off to your own venture. (Note: By the same token, you will have to argue compellingly that this this is actually what X would have said about the issue at hand.)

A very broad version of the first template is pursued, for example, by Gregory Conti in this paper:

> John Stuart Mill is frequently treated as a progenitor of our liberal or liberal-democratic world (Holmes, 1997; Riley, 2007; Turner, 2010; Urbinati, 2002). The Millian corpus is looked upon as a deposit of essential truths by which liberals live today, a kind of liberal-democratic ur-text (Gray, 1995; Ten, 1974). [...] In surveys of modern political thought, his books (or, usually, just *book*) enter as the point at which a modern liberal-democratic mindset and its cardinal commitments are supposed to have begun to receive a systematic coherence (Turner, 2017). There is an element of truth in this portrait, of course. Liberalism is devoted to women's rights, to liberty and autonomy, to representative government; something called democracy-to which Mill claimed repeated allegiance-seems indubitably to have triumphed.
>
> Upon closer inspection, though, it is difficult to credit modern liberal-democratic politics with having a particularly Millian hue. [... ...] This essay canvasses a handful of domains in which the discrepancy between Mill and modern liberalism is especially strong. Given space constraints, it cannot make claims to comprehensive coverage of any individual topic. Consequently, the goal of this article is not to offer a novel interpretation of any particular theme in Mill, but rather, by assembling these points of contrast, to convey a more accurate impression than is usually given of the gulf that separates liberalism today from its nineteenth-century variety as embodied in the platform of its greatest exponent. [...]
>
> This more accurate impression is valuable for three reasons. First, given Mill's towering standing in the canon of political theory, it is intrinsically important to have a correct assessment of the content of his political program. Second, appreciation of the gap between Mill and liberals today should alter our general orientation towards reading his work. Some figures are worth studying because of their similarities to us, and others for the challenges that confronting difference poses to us; and Mill falls much more in the second category than is standardly admitted. Third, and relatedly, it is important to recognize the gulf that separates modern from Millian liberalism in order that we might have a better understanding of the regimes and societies in which we now live. Both critics and defenders of liberalism, in academic and public discourse, are inclined to use Mill exegesis as a proxy for debating its current merits. In so doing, we are liable to misunderstand both Mill and our own societies, attributing to the latter Millian characteristics that they lack and to the former modern attitudes and ideas, which he did not hold.[32]

There is a certain way we think about Mill's liberalism in relation to contemporary liberalism (first paragraph of the quote). Conti's *research objective* is to show us that this way of thinking is wrong by presenting an overview of several divergences that taken together paint a picture of significant difference (second paragraph). He explicitly justifies why such a correction is *relevant* in the third paragraph of the above quote.

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32 Gregory Conti, 'John Stuart Mill and Modern Liberalism: A Study in Contrasts', *Constellations* 28, no. 3 (2021): 379–80, https://doi.org/10/gm3gwd.

📖 *Lea Ypi: On Revolution in Kant and Marx*

By contrast, a paper by Lea Ypi, summarised in the abstract quoted below, additionally bears features of the third template:

This essay compares the thoughts of Kant and Marx on revolution. It focuses in particular on two issues: the contribution of revolutionary enthusiasm to the cause of emancipatory political agents and its educative role in illustrating the possibility of progress for future generations. In both cases, it is argued, the defence of revolution is offered in the context of illustrating the possibility of moral progress for the species, even if not for individual human beings, and brings out the centrality of collective agency in moving towards universal moral goals. Discussing the implications of these points is of significant historical interest: it allows us to defend an interpretation of Kant's political thought which is sensitive to the material conditions of historical development and to rescue Marx from an amoral reading of his philosophy of history. Reflecting on the role and preconditions of transformative collective agency is also of normative interest: it allows us to better evaluate the significance of political events that, firstly, re-shape the boundaries of political feasibility and, secondly, play a crucial educative role in motivating future progressive initiatives.[33]

Ypi's *research objective* is to show that Kant's and Marx's conceptions of revolution overlap with regard to two aspects. This objective is *interesting* because we usually think of Kant and Marx as proponents of quite different theories and these overlaps call into question whether this commonly presumed opposition is that stringent after all. It also is *relevant* because the central theme of their agreement touches on questions about revolutions that are relevant to current debates and thus it is worthwhile for us to see if we can learn something from Marx's and Kant's thoughts on the matter for our own present purposes.

Where to find some more

If you want to look for further sources of inspiration on your own, an easy starting point is to look for the names of historical authors in journals that publish political theory in general. Renowned journals in which you will find essays on political theory, not exclusively but frequently including works focusing on the history of ideas, include *Political Theory; Constellations; European Journal of Political Theory;* and, more broadly, the *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*; *Journal of the History of Ideas or* the *Journal of Political Ideologies.*

If you want to take a closer look at what constitutes good paper in the history of ideas, the following also provide instructive starting points:

Skinner, Quentin. "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas." *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3-53. https://doi.org/10/dj5gxk.

Wolin, Sheldon S. "Political Theory as a Vocation." *The American Political Science Review* 63, no. 4 (1969): 1062-82. https://doi.org/10/dwhgdt.

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33   Lea Ypi, 'On Revolution in Kant and Marx', *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (1 June 2014): 262, https://doi.org/10/f6j4dk.

4 The Checklist

You can run through this checklist to vet crucial aspects of your paper before handing it in. (But do so in time to still have an actual opportunity to revise it – the sooner the better!) Feel free to add further criteria based on your own experience, perhaps keeping an eye on personal weaknesses or the special requirements of your instructor on your specific course.

Note: This checklist is not exhaustive and of course cannot provide a guarantee of success. It is simply a tool to aid you in addressing important points.

Research Objective

- ☐ Research objective clearly and precisely articulated, easy to identify, stated early on
- ☐ Research objective is actually attained by the paper
- ☐ The overall method or argument of the paper exactly aligns with the research objective
- ☐ *If chosen by you:* I'm convinced that the research objective is interesting for someone who is interested in the course topic.
- ☐ My research objective and/or my approach serves as a compelling showcase for my capabilities – it shows that I can come up with something on my own.

Introduction

- ☐ Research objective <u>succinctly</u> situated in a context that makes the relevance of this objective clear: Why should someone who is interested in the course topic be interested in my paper? (*Optional for short essays*)
- ☐ Research objective quickly and clearly identified (*short essay:* first or second sentence)
- ☐ *If presented as a question:* result / answer clearly stated
- ☐ Roadmap provided: transparent representation of how I proceed with a view to attaining my objective
- ☐ No platitudes / commonplace clichés (à la "Since the dawn of time, people have wondered about questions of justice" or "In today's world, populism is more wide-spread than ever").

Argumentation

- ☐ Any arguments are completely and precisely articulated
- ☐ Arguments are clearly presented, leaving no room for interpretation
- ☐ Arguments are evidently compelling (valid/strong)
- ☐ Premises are non-controversial or made plausible by sub-arguments or the scope of the argument is qualified accordingly (weaknesses made transparent)
- ☐ Any empirical claims on which I rely are supported by sources or explicitly made plausible
- ☐ Any argument warrants exactly the conclusion I draw from it (by no means less)
- ☐ For each step in my line of argument, it is transparent how it relates to both to earlier and later steps and to my overall research objectives

- ☐ Arguments are consistent with each other (terms are always used in the same way, no contradictions between different parts of the text)
- ☐ I show that I am aware of possible objections or alternatives to my argument
- ☐ I offer convincing rebuttals to objections / alternatives to defend my position (as appropriate to the scope of the text)
- ☐ I always present opposing arguments precisely and charitably (as convincingly as possible)
- ☐ I have proofread my entire text through the lens of a little, critically nagging sibling who doesn't believe a word I say and keeps asking: "But why?!"
- ☐ Where there are relevant connections between separate aspects of my topic, I explicitly point them out in order to paint an insightful bigger picture.
- ☐ If I presuppose any particular method, I make this fully explicit; justify why it is appropriate to my project and show that I am aware of any problems it faces.

Understanding of Subject Matter

- ☐ Meaning of all concepts important to my paper has been explicated
- ☐ Arguments and views of others are presented in a precise, nuanced, and charitable way
- ☐ I am confident that I understand all the technical terms and theories correctly
- ☐ Where there is room for debate about what others intended to say, I give reasons why my interpretation is plausible (as compared to alternative interpretations)
- ☐ When reproducing what others say, I always try to do so in a way that adds value (more clearly, more concisely, more precisely or specifically linked to my project)
- ☐ When appropriate and relevant to my project, I dissect an issue into its individual components and uncover their interconnections
- ☐ I have considered using a suitable example to help clarify difficult or particularly important concepts
- ☐ I do not disregard any literature that is either known to me from the course or evidently pertinent to my topic if it would clearly be useful to my project
- ☐ I do not use any literature that I have a nagging suspicion is actually just a poor choice for my project
- ☐ I use my paper to showcase that I have learnt something from the course and know my way around the topic

Conclusion

- ☐ No additional arguments / claims about my research objective
- ☐ Summarises my findings in a way that again succinctly explains how what I did over the course of my paper leads to this result
- ☐ Final conclusions clearly and precisely stated, no room for interpretation
- ☐ Conclusions correspond unambiguously to the announced research objective (answers the question or is exactly my thesis).
- ☐ Conclusions placed back in the context that originally explained the relevance of the research objective in the introduction and so too makes the present conclusion relevant (*optional for short essays*)
- ☐ Important implications of the conclusion highlighted (What follows from this?)

☐ No platitudes / commonplace clichés (e.g. "A more detailed inquiry remains the aim of further research")

Structure

☐ I am completely clear about the structure of my text – if someone bumps into me at the grocery store and asks me why I do this and that on page 5, I can explain it to them.

☐ At every point, it is clear which function whatever I am doing at this very point fulfils within my overall paper and why it is necessary. (I.e., this is clear for readers who are not inside my head.)

☐ I deliver exactly as advertised. There are no references to anything I later discarded or cut out. All steps are clearly recognisable as what was announced at an earlier point.

☐ If my line of argument consists of several, noticeably separate steps, I have clearly marked the transitions from one to another. If necessary, I draw a brief interim conclusion and announce how this will now relate to the next step.

☐ I make the structure of my text as explicit and easy to follow as possible: I name what I am doing; make cross-references and interconnections transparent; if necessary, I number individual steps (first, second, ...) or mark connections and juxtapositions (on the one hand – on the other hand; either – or; however, in contrast to, nonetheless, likewise, irrespective of, ...).

Citations and References

☐ Any and all cited sources are included in the references section

☐ All references complete and in a consistent style

☐ Citations included for all direct and indirect quotations

☐ All citations complete and in consistent style

☐ Citation style of citations corresponds to citation style of the bibliography

☐ If someone has suggested a substantive change that I have included, I give due credit in a footnote (e.g. "I owe this point to a discussion with Andrea Mayer.").

☐ If I can get information I need from different sources, I always get it from the most reputable and reliable source (e.g. an academic handbook instead of the Oxford English Dictionary, a journal article instead of a master's thesis).

Language

☐ I have run an automatic spell check (in my word processor or, e.g., on Grammarly)

☐ I always say exactly what I mean – no more and no less.

☐ Whenever I can think of a simpler way of saying the same thing while I'm re-reading my paper, I change it and say it more simply instead.

☐ Whenever I refer to something that is commonly referred to by an established technical term within the relevant debate, I always use this exact technical term.

☐ For all the sentences that I myself stumble over or have to think about while re-reading, I have tried again to put them more clearly.

☐ *If possible:* text has been proofread and revised accordingly

Formalities

- ☐ Cover sheet or information at the beginning: Title of the paper (or assigned topic), my first and last name, student ID (Matrikelnummer), name of the course, term, name of the instructor, date of submission.
- ☐ Appropriate number of subheadings with logical outline hierarchy
- ☐ Formatting of the document makes it easy to read
- ☐ Page numbers included
- ☐ *For submission in print:* wider margins and larger line spacing
- ☐ *For submission in print:* pages stapled / bound together
- ☐ *If applicable:* Appendices complete
- ☐ *If applicable:* Table of contents complete, exactly matching headings in body text
- ☐ *If required:* Word count declared (body text including headings and footnotes)

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