

The following presents some writing guidelines, potential pitfalls for political science writing, a guide to writing theses, and some other common writing issues.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. SOME WRITING GUIDELINES

	<p>The following is a brief, flexible guide to organizing a paper:</p> <p>A good <b>introduction</b> usually begins with something general—and interesting—about the paper topic. For example, the opening sentence might be a question, a startling fact, or a quotation. However, it is even more important to include a <b>thesis</b>. The <i>thesis</i> states the main point and argument of your paper. Authors usually place a thesis toward the end of the introduction, but it could also be at the beginning. For more information on constructing good theses, please see the discussion on page 2 of this handout.</p> <p>Each body paragraph discusses a relevant topic or issue area that you described in your thesis. It should begin with a <i>topic sentence</i> or a <i>transitional sentence</i>. A <i>topic sentence</i> lets the reader know what the paragraph will discuss. A <i>transitional sentence</i> links that paragraph to other paragraphs and can also be at the end of a paragraph.</p> <p>At the beginning of the <b>conclusion</b>, it is a good idea to restate your thesis. Then elaborate in general terms what conclusions your paper has reached, what the implications of these conclusions are, and/or what avenues are available for further research. Thus, you move from the specific to the general; in this way the conclusion is structured opposite to the introduction.</p>
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### 2. SOME POLITICAL SCIENCE PITFALLS

**Concepts as Actors:**

Incorrect Example: *“Marxism wanted to overthrow the bourgeoisie.”*

Marxism is a concept, not an animate being. It cannot therefore act. Karl Marx, a human being, wanted to overthrow the bourgeoisie; Marxism was his theory and ideology about why and how to do so.

**Concepts as Historical Facts:**

Incorrect Example: *“Marxism...can be described as the development of a class split, followed by the uniting of the working class...”*

You can describe Marxism as an ideology, a theory, and/or as a political movement. You cannot describe it as a history. It presents a theoretical and ideological *interpretation* of history, as well as a *prescription* of how to overcome class exploitation and achieve a communist utopia.

**Overstatement:**

Examples: *“[Hu-De-Hart] is calling for automatic and permanent inclusion into a group based on race without the members of that race being allowed to decide which subgroup, if any, they will belong to.”*

*“...Searle states that in order for higher education to serve a democracy there must exist an elite...This idea coupled with his second thought that the better an true intellectual qualities must be separate from the rest suggesting [sic] both a traditional and a Nazi society.”*

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<sup>1</sup> I believe graduate students at UC Berkeley originally created this document and I have added and changed it over the years  
 – Michael Nelson

Overstatement may make distinctions clear, but it is not accurate or appropriate. It is always better to critique and try to refute the best elements of an author's argument, not the worst. This makes your argument and critique much more powerful and compelling.

### 3. THE THESIS

Every essay should have a thesis statement in its introduction. In your introduction, you should outline the subject of the discussion, the various sides of the issue, and the argument you will make. *Below are some good examples.* You should use your thesis as a framework within which you will proceed with your analysis. This means referring back to your thesis in the body of your essay. You should then conclude your essay by referring back to your thesis.

**Some Good Thesis Statements** (please note that these have been chosen because they make an argument, not because they are necessarily accurate in their argument):

“While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.”

*This example is taken from a website at UNC on thesis statement writing, a good resource itself:*

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/thesis.html>

“In order for a vision of a ‘rethought’ America to comply with an inclusive liberal capitalist democracy, the envisioned society must align its main principles with those of liberalism[:] the values of individualism and association, as well as toleration of other identities and use of informal procedure. Shelby Steel and John Searle anticipate societies that are compatible, while Evelyn Hu-De-Hart and Troy Duster design societies that attempt to be inclusive without being compatible [with] a liberal capitalist democracy”

“Two of the most influential contemporary approaches to international relations theory are neorealism and neoliberalism. The debate between these two approaches has dominated much of international relations theory for the last decade. It is now commonplace for an article about some aspect of international relations theory to begin by locating itself in terms of this debate. These two approaches and the debate between them have failed to contribute as much as they might have to international relations theory. These approaches suffer from serious internal weaknesses and limitations that the neorealist-neoliberal debate often has tended to obscure rather than to clarify. Once we have exposed and clarified these weaknesses and limitations, we will be able to see several important directions for future theoretical work.”

### 4. SOME COMMON WRITING ISSUES

**Citations:** When you use the ideas, arguments, phrases, and/or language of others, you must always give credit where it is due. Lack of citation is plagiarism, which is the highest crime there is in academia. Referring to authors indicates to the reader that you have read their work, and are drawing inferences from them. It also enables the reader to read the same passages that you draw on and decide whether your interpretation and analysis has validity. Careful textual analysis with citation of the texts is one of the most persuasive ways of making an argument. Improper or insufficient citation can lower your overall grade. Lack of citation can lead to a failing grade.

**Spelling and Grammatical Errors:** These matter because they make your writing rough, unclear, and inelegant. A well-written essay that has factual mistakes will be graded higher than a poorly written essay making the same mistakes. If you take the time to spell-check and proofread, this indicates to your reader that you have taken the assignment seriously.

**Incomplete Sentences:** A complete sentence requires a subject, an object, and a verb relating the two. Incomplete sentences confuse the reader.

*Incomplete Sentence: "This is seen simply by looking at what each one was able to produce. The two most influential events during the century; World War II and the Cold War."*

*Complete Sentence: "This is seen simply by looking at what each one was able to produce: the two most influential events of the century, World War II and the Cold War."*

### **Run-on Sentences:**

*Incorrect: "Both Marxism and Nazism opposed these fundamental characteristics of how liberal capitalist democracy organized society creating major differences in ideologies which ultimately were hostile toward capitalist society."*

*Correct (uses 2 sentences): "Both Marxists and Nazis opposed the liberal capitalist democratic ways of organizing society. Marxist and Nazi principles of social organization were very different from, and ultimately hostile to, capitalist society."*

### **Unclear Antecedent Article and/or Pronoun:**

*Example: "The survey goes on into many aspects of multiculturalism such as the suggesting of group over individual identity and the non-capitalistic notion of an unfair and non-equal market. This is reflected in the essay's support of race base quotas..."*

It is not clear what "This" refers to in the preceding sentence. Given the placement of "This" it should refer to the subject of the preceding sentence ("survey") but clearly does not.

### **Passive Voice:**

*Passive: "The industrial revolution led to the writing of the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx."*

*Passive, but better: "The industrial revolution led Karl Marx to write the Communist Manifesto."*

*Active: "Karl Marx wrote the Communist Manifesto as a response to the economic inequalities created by the industrial revolution."*

Try to avoid using passive constructions. Active constructions are easier to understand. Active constructions also lead to fewer "concepts as actors" and "concepts as history" errors.

**Contractions:** Do not use contractions (*don't, can't*) in formal writing.

**Possessive Pronouns:** Most pronouns that indicate possession do NOT take on an apostrophe. For example: *its* = possessive pronoun; *it's* = it is. The exception is "one's" as in "one's belief in realism..."