Writing Advice for Political Science Students: How to Prevent Rejection by Referee #3

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Abstract

This document provides concise advice about the most important elements for effectively organizing and writing an applied political science paper: title, abstract, table of contents, introduction, table and figures, and—for technical papers—lemmas and propositions. If referee #3 cannot discern the main takeaways from your document simply by reading these elements, then he or she will reject it for poor writing. Additionally, introduction sections must answer five key questions to convince referee #3. However, clear writing is no substitute for quality science. (And yes, these are the main takeaway points from this document!)

Keywords: Political Science, Writing

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This document provides concise advice about some of the most important elements for effectively writing an applied political science research paper. Specifically, your goal is to win over the dreaded referee #3. However, because anyone can be referee #3, this advice will help to improve the clarity of your contribution to the modal political scientist. ***Also, for my students, this document highlights a series of requirements before I will read your document.***

The present advice complements other excellent writing advice documents. David Collier's writing advice document (email me for copy) is more comprehensive and provides many examples from published articles, along with a host of specific grammar advice. Andrew Little characterizes the three main strategies for introducing a paper. Barry Weingast requires you to focus on one main takeaway point. Kosuke Imai forces you to think about the relationship between sentences in your abstract, paragraphs in your introduction, and sections of your paper. Gary King focuses on replication but provides generally applicable advice for structuring empirical papers.[1] Also read the submission guidelines at various journals, even if you are not ready to submit a manuscript there. Although mostly focused on more specific points that are not crucial until actually submitting a document, they contain little odds and ends that are useful to have in mind.

1 Writing versus Science

A caveat: clear writing should complement rather than substitute for quality science. If your research design is poor or game theoretic model is solved incorrectly, then the best writing in the world (hopefully) will not save your manuscript. Between writing and science, writing is much easier. Social scientific writing is relatively formulaic, whereas science requires harder training and more creativity. However, until you have mastered how to write for political scientists, your contributions are likely to be undervalued.

2 Title

Suppose you are searching for articles on a specific topic, perhaps through previous issues of a journal, perhaps through JSTOR. What is the first and possibly only piece of information you learn about an article? The title. The title should be informative by containing information about the topic and perhaps your answer as

[1] Zachary Elkins provides links to a host of other writing documents.

well. Many titles contain a short broad phrase punctuated by a question mark/colon and followed by a second, more specific phrase. (See the Collier writing guide for specific examples.) This is an important issue beyond academic papers. Many have criticized Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign message for lacking a succinct and coherent reason to vote for her, as opposed to Bernie Sanders (democratic socialism) or Donald Trump (racism and economic nationalism). Enable your paper to exceed 270 electoral college votes (at least in the mind of referee #3). ***I will not read any document, even a very preliminary idea, if it does not contain a title. No title implies no topic or idea, so why should anyone else give it a second thought?*** Like all aspects of a paper, it is helpful to revise your title throughout the writing process.

3 Abstract

Suppose, once again, that you are searching for articles. What is the second piece of information you learn about an article? The abstract. If the topic seems unrelated to your interests or if the analysis seems poorly done, then you are unlikely to read further. Similarly, referee #3 has a famously short attention span. If the abstract does not succinctly state the purpose and takeaways from the paper, then referee #3 is unlikely to read much further, or will miss the main points of the paper. The abstract is the elevator speech for your paper. For example, imagine that you get into an elevator with Barack Obama and you are both riding to the top of a tall building. What would you say about your paper? How can you convincingly convey the question and answer in 30 seconds? Remember this mantra and live by it: ***No abstract implies no clear idea.*** Here is a suggestion for how to organize the abstract of an empirical research paper, sentence by sentence:

> [1. Research question] [2. Gap in literature] [3a. Your hypothesis(ses)] [3b. (Optional) Second sentence about hypotheses] [4a. Data setup] [4b. (Optional) Statement about methods] [5a. Main empirical findings] [5b. Second sentence about empirical findings] [5c. (Optional) Third sentence about empirical findings]

And, for a game theory paper:

> [1. Research question] [2. Gap in literature] [3. Short statement of model setup and main tradeoff] [4. Result 1] [5. Result 2] [6. Empirics if applicable]

Finally, note that most political science journals have a limit of 150 words for an abstract. You should stick

to this when writing and revising your abstract.

I will read a very preliminary write-up of a research topic if it does not contain an abstract. However, for anything beyond that, I require at least a sketch of an abstract, i.e., fill in the parts you have thought about and you can leave other parts TBD in brackets. This is still useful because it succinctly summarizes what you have done and what you still need to do.

4 Table of Contents

Published articles in political science do not contain a table of contents. I do not understand why. The table of contents, much like the title and abstract, contains a concise summary of the information in the paper. I recommend keeping a table of contents in the paper during the draft stages to help organize your thoughts. Personally, I put a table of contents on the first page of the appendix along with a list of tables and a list of figures, to accompany the published manuscript.[2] If the table of contents does not provide a coherent guide for the argument and evidence that you advance in the paper, then it suggests you need to reorganize the paper. Think hard about organizing sections and subsections, along with their titles. ***Similar to the abstract requirement, for anything beyond a very preliminary idea, I will not read a document that does not contain a table of contents.***

5 Introduction

For better or worse, the introduction is the most important part of a political science paper. If the introduction is confusing or suggests a narrow contribution, then referee #3 is unlikely to read the remainder of the paper closely and will fail to give you credit for your amazing research design or fixed point argument (unless it is a more technically oriented journal). The introduction section—perhaps spilling into the literature review section—should answer five key questions.[3] Failing to clearly answer any one of these questions may be sufficient for referee #3 to recommend rejection. It may be a useful writing exercise to directly answer each question before proceeding to write several pages that resemble a standard intro section.

[2] The respective LaTeXcommands are \tableofcontents, \listoftables, and \listoffigures.

[3] These questions complement Andrew Little's writing document, see link above.

1. What is the research question? Your answer is irrelevant if you do not have a question. If the research question is not clear within the first sentence of the abstract or the first/second paragraph of the paper, then it is time to rewrite. It is perfectly fine to start with a broad question like "What causes Y?" and after several paragraphs narrow it down to a question of the form "What is the effect of X on Y?" and/or "How does X affect Y?"

2. Why is this question interesting/important? There are two possibilities: inherent importance because it affects human welfare, and considerable scholarship has focused on it. The latter spills into the next question.

3. What does the existing literature say, and what are the gaps with regard to answering this question? Typically, an author characterizes the literature as either incomplete, contradictory, or wrong.

   (a) For questions that have received little attention, you can simply say that few contributions have focused on this question—although, appealing to the previous point, this puts additional burden on emphasizing the inherent importance of the question. Or, sometimes you can simply identify a gap between two big literatures. For example, many have studied the political effects of oil production and many have examined why human rights violations vary across countries, yet few have examined the relationship between oil production and human rights violations. Another possibility is to present an empirical pattern that the literature has not previously shown.

   (b) For questions that have received considerable attention, one possibility is to argue that existing arguments contradict each other. For example, scholars X argue this, scholars Y argue that, however when we think about X and Y together, they cannot both be correct.

   (c) Arguing that existing arguments are in conflict with each other is generally less risky than the third option: explicitly arguing that others are wrong. Typically, focusing on the errors of others should not be the main target in the introduction, whereas later in the paper you can gently point out some problems with existing research and why we need more research on the topic. Remember, the people that are wrong are likely to be referee #3. A generally good writing tip is to take out needlessly aggressive phrases.

4. What is your argument? You should draw a line after the third paragraph of your intro (maybe fourth, if you start with short and punchy paragraphs). If referee #3 has no sense of what your paper is going

to do by then, then he or she will reject your paper—meaning you need to get to the point sooner.

5. How does your answer differ from *and* improve upon the existing literature? Simply saying something new is necessary but not sufficient, and this requires a clear statement of why your answer is in fact novel. However, you also need to convince referee #3 that your study truly constitutes an improvement. For empirical papers, this could involve new data collection or a different research design that better eliminates alternative explanations. For game theory papers, this could involve modeling something in a new way or highlighting a new mechanism to explain an outcome. The modal stated reason that referee #3 rejects a manuscript is that it fails to offer a sufficient advance over the existing literature on topic X.

6 Tables and Figures

Political Analysis' submission requirements contain excellent advice for the information that should accompany tables and figures in an article.

7 Signposts Within the Paper

Take a deep breath. You have spent hundreds, if not thousands, of hours writing your paper. Guess what? Referee #3 will not read the whole thing, at least not carefully. You need to provide a way for him or her to spend a minimal amount of time reading your paper and still come away with the main points. Fortunately, I have already covered the main elements of the paper: title, abstract, table of contents, introduction, tables and figures. In a game theory paper, add lemmas, propositions, and other formal results to this list. After reading all these elements of your paper, referee #3 should already learn most of what there is to learn from the paper. This places a heavy burden on the writer: if these elements of the paper are not organized coherently, bad consequences will follow. Your advisors will be upset with you. Referee #3 will (obviously) reject your paper. Search committees will throw out your application. People will spit on you as you walk along the sidewalk. Politicians will continue to ignore facts and science. But you have the power to prevent these unfortunate events! (Except probably the last one, and the second-to-last one is unlikely regardless of your quality as a political scientist.)

8 Practice Makes Perfect . . . er, *Better*

Putting all this writing advice into action is difficult and takes practice. There are two invaluable practice strategies:

1. Read existing publications with an eye toward the organization of the document, as opposed to evaluating its scientific merit. Take several articles and invert them from a published document into an outline. How does it organize the main elements of the paper? How does it answer the main introduction questions? Doing this numerous times will not only provide templates for writing your own papers, but will also make you a critical consumer of published writing.

2. Write your own documents and receive feedback. If you are actively thinking about the advice from this and other writing documents, and have spent time outlining published articles, then you will provide your advisors with a higher quality document. It is always easier to provide advice on papers that are well-written, e.g., you want advice to be mainly concentrated on the scientific merit of your argument and evidence, not on writing. And do not fear criticism from your advisors. If it does not come from us, then it will come from . . . yes, you guessed it, referee #3.

9 Odds and Ends

The following provides more minor requirements before I will read students' documents. These, of course, also dovetail with points that referee #3 will likely make in his or her referee report.

- Double-space (or at least, 1.5) and do not use a tiny font size. My eyes have deteriorated considerably since I began grad school. Please do not contribute to their further demise.

- Spell-check and check for basic grammatical errors. This signals that you care about your work, which is a precondition for me and others to care about your work. Referee #3 has an implicit typo rule: if there are at least X typos in the paper, then they will characterize it as poorly written and will reject it regardless of its quality.

- Related, spend some time on sentence construction. Poorly constructed sentences also fall under the typo rule. This includes writing sentences with an active rather than passive voice. Instead of "I

was intrigued by the writing document," write: "The writing document intrigued me." This website provides more examples and advice.

- Always include page numbers. I have a semi-funny story about this if you are curious.
- Number your sections and subsections. Most political science journals do not do this, for reasons I do not understand, but it greatly aids the clarity and organization of the paper.
- Don't use contractions if it's a serious piece of writing. And if it's not a serious piece of writing, then why should referee #3 bother to read it?
- Do not use semi-colons, either, unless you are separating elements of a list. From Kurt Vonnegut: "Here is a lesson in creative writing. First rule: Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college."
- Do not end sentences with prepositions. In a variant of a Winston Churchill quote: "Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put."
- For graduate students: Use LaTeXto signal competence to referee #3. Although I will read documents not written in LaTeX, I will encourage you to switch to LaTeX. (And yes, I realize that writing LaTeX instead of LaTeX is very pretentious, but it makes referee #3 happy.)
- Do not obsess over making the perfect game tree or other figures using LaTeX packages, especially in earlier stages of the paper. This is almost never the best use of your time. PowerPoint enables perfectly proficient figures in much less time. Your time is better spent, for example, editing your abstract and intro to win over referee #3! (However, do make sure to clearly label all elements of the figure in large enough font.)
- It annoys me when a solo author refers to himself or herself as "we." You are but one person. If referee #3 ignores that the submission process is supposed to be double-blind, then he or she will also likely be annoyed by your arrogance.
- (Do not contain sentences in parentheses in a serious document. Such comments should tend to go into footnotes, although be judicious with footnotes as well.)
- Good guess! I am referee #3. (But the walrus was Paul.)