

Political Science 302: Feedback on short papers

Below are some generic pitfalls that afflicted many of you. Read these over in addition to the specific comments written on your short paper, and ask in class or see me if you have any questions.

In general:

- Don't *overwrite*, using incredibly wordy or convoluted ways of expressing yourself. "Martin shows that the necessity of the cultural in the process of imaging the gametes in her analysis which she herself argues are not accurately represented by said texts, furthermore negating their validity" is just a really incomprehensible sort of sentence.
- *Reference* the text specifically, using page numbers in parentheses or **short** quotes. This is especially important when you are posing your question: if you are implicitly or explicitly being critical of the text, you must show that your criticism is warranted by the author's actual words. On the other hand, don't *over-quote*. Your summary should not consist entirely of quotes from the article strung together.
- Avoid really banal, "filler" sentences that just take up words, e.g. "For many decades feminists have debated the question of differences and now it has come to the fore in feminist discussion in political theory in a new and important way that many people are writing about."
- A section of text with just a question mark next to it I read at least twice but still didn't know what you meant. If you have a lot of question marks, I recommend reading your writing aloud, perhaps to a friend, and asking whether it has basic coherence.

Summaries:

- Avoid writing a summary that is a series of sentences that take the article strictly in order: "first Wittig says this on page 1. Then she says this on page 2. Then at the end she says this other thing." You need to *synthesise* the text, not just flip through the pages finding the most important point on each one.
- Be *specific* rather than *vague*. "Martin is critical of the way culture influences biology. She says that male and female reproduction are shown in stereotyped ways" is less compelling than "Martin draws on human biology texts to exemplify the general thesis that cultural imagery (including gender stereotypes) can inform alleged neutral representations of biological systems."
- Your summary should contain a very clear and specific sentence (or two) that states the author's main thesis.
- Say *what* the author says rather than *that* she says something: for example, "Young offers us a theory of oppression, defining what oppression is and is not" does not actually tell us anything about what Young's theory *is*.
- Don't repeat yourself. You don't have space.

Questions:

- A good critical question (in this assignment) is *internal* to the text. That is, it offers a way of thinking about the argument that the author would have to take seriously, given what she has written. I find that very commonly students will write, "Frye raises some good points but her article is out-of-date. Hasn't feminism moved on?" or "Iris Young's account of oppression is convincing but very negative. How can we overcome oppression?" These are, of course, good

questions in their way, but because they can be asked so glibly, of more or less every feminist theoretical text, they can come across in the context of the assignment as too easy, not really showing any great insight but just throwing up hands. Avoid these questions unless you think the text makes some claim to strategy or action that it cannot redeem. In another version, students will criticise the author for not writing about a different topic. For example, “Martin’s analysis is good but why doesn’t she talk about childbirth, which only women can do?” This may be true, but it doesn’t show that her analysis of the egg and the sperm is bad.

- Motivate and pose only *one* question. Do *not* list scads of questions without showing why any of them are really interesting: “Martin shows how gender influences sex, so does she believe in the sex-gender distinction? Furthermore, she is even critical of the cybernetic model so what alternatives is she really left with? And another thing is that...” etc.
- The success of a critical question hangs on accurately representing the text, and you must be very careful about this. For example, “Martin argues that gender stereotypes are caused by biology textbooks but actually there are many causes of sexism. How does she expect reforming science to change society?” Martin does NOT ever argue this claim, so the question is moot and gets, sadly, no points.
- Avoid criticisms that are *question-begging*: that is, do not assume the point you thought you were proving. For example, “Martin says that sperm are represented as active and therefore masculine. But sperm do move about a lot so they really are active, so this could be just an objective description and not a bias.” (The phrase “to beg the question” has this, philosophically specific, meaning. It CANNOT substitute for the generic phrase “to raise the question” e.g. “The lack of women in business leadership raises important questions about implicit bias.”)
- A really strong question picks up an issue in the text where the author leaves off. So, for example, the baldly stated “Can we ever avoid anthropomorphizing eggs and sperm?” is a good question, but Martin says a few things about it, albeit not fully developed. Better to precede the question with something like, “Martin herself asks whether we can ‘envision a less stereotypical view,’ concluding that even cybernetic models are ‘hardly neutral’ and can ‘allow new forms of social control’” (499). She suggests that it is always politically dangerous to award personalities to cells (501)...” etc.

Technicalities

- The correct way to reference the title of an **article** is in quotes e.g. “Five Faces of Oppression.” Titles of **books** (or journals) are italicised OR underlined (these are typographically equivalent) e.g. *Justice and the Politics of Difference* OR Justice and the Politics of Difference.
- If you quote the author you must do so accurately. If you shorten a quote using ellipses (...) it must make sense in your paper and must correctly represent the meaning of the original text.
- In this style of academic writing, the first time you refer to an author you’ll use the full name, e.g. “In this article, Sandra Bartky suggests...”, and thereafter just a last name: “Bartky argues that...”