

## General feedback on short papers: POLS 350

### Writing style:

**Opening sentence:** should have content, rather than being bland.

Weaker: “Susan Okin wrote an article about gender, public, and private, in which she tells us a lot of important things about those concepts.”

Stronger: “In her essay, ‘Gender, The Public and the Private’ Susan Moller Okin defends the view that the traditional distinction in much western political theory between the public and domestic spheres cannot be upheld if the arguments of feminist critics are taken seriously.”

**Avoid saying *that* an author talks about certain themes (in general). Instead say *what* she says.**

Weaker: “Okin sets out the public and private spheres and says that they are very important to certain gender issues, and that the second shift and domestic violence are part of the overall problem.”

Stronger: “Okin identifies the private sphere as the domestic, arguing that defence of privacy in the household tends to leave women’s housework and childcare labour, as well as their disproportionate experience of spousal violence, outside the realm of the ‘political’.”

Avoid bland **criticism** OR **praise:**

Avoid: “Okin’s article is hopelessly dated and full of inconsistencies that make it impossible to take seriously.”

Avoid: “Okin has written a very important article that makes excellent points about everything she mentions.”

**Avoid fake-academic writing.** Often students seem to think that as they are writing university essays they should make their writing as circuitous, complex, and wordy as possible. While you will certainly find examples of this among published articles, I don’t recommend it, especially for undergraduates still learning to express complicated ideas. If you are getting a lot of corrections and question marks on your papers, move to writing short, simple sentences that are close to sentences you would speak.

Obscure: “The complexities of the political discourse referenced by Okin lead to a consideration of the meaning of the public and private as evidenced by her necessary discussion of their intermingling and inevitable mutual implication.”

Clear: “Okin argues that in the history of western political thought the public and private spheres have been treated as distinct, even though they require each other.”

### Referencing, citing, quoting:

**Referencing:** use any acceptable style. The two main ones are:

1. She says that privacy remains a feminist concern (Okin 1991, 123). Thereafter can use only page numbers, e.g. (124).
2. She says that privacy remains a feminist concern (“Gender,” 123). Thereafter can use only page numbers, e.g. (124).

In both cases put the full reference to the text cited at the end of the essay. Citing your source is a standard of good scholarship.

If you attribute a view to the author, you should cite the text. If I am reading your paper and thinking “Okin never said that!” then I want a page number so I can look at the section of text you have in mind.

The first time you **refer to an author**, use their full name: Susan Moller Okin. Thereafter use their last name: Okin. (When talking about authors we conventionally refer to them by last name in anglophone academia.)

**Misquoting:** you cannot selectively quote or quote words as if they were the author’s own when this misrepresents the meaning of the original text.

For example: “Okin says that women have ‘special moral sensibilities’ (75) but this can be challenged.” On page 75 Okin attributes this view to nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminists, she does not say it in her own voice.

### **Writing and rhetorical errors**

The apostrophe in English typically indicates a **possessive** noun, e.g. Okin’s argument (the argument belonging to Okin), feminists’ claims (the claims of the feminists). It never indicates a **plural**, e.g. liberal thinkers (more than one thinker). The notable exception is *its* (belonging to it) versus *it’s* (contraction of “it is”).

A **tautology** is the repetition of the same claim in a way intended to be explanatory. For example, “great organizations are those that perform excellently.” As “great” and “excellent” mean roughly the same thing, this doesn’t meaningfully define a class of organizations. Here’s another: “Okin argues that gender inequality is patriarchal and is caused by men’s power throughout history.” In this sentence it is not clear that “gender inequality,” “patriarchal,” and “men’s power” have significantly different meanings, and hence the sentence doesn’t actually tell us anything about why there is “gender inequality” in the first place (although it makes a causal claim).

### **Critical questions:**

**The best critical questions** on Okin picked up on the same themes that the literature on Okin (which, by now, is large) picks up on:

1. Okin (in this article) says both that privacy is central to human flourishing (including for women) and that feminists cannot afford to understand the domestic sphere as outside politics. Her examples of domestic violence, marital rape, and the sexual division of labour provide compelling grounds to think that norms of privacy as they have been constructed in the history of western political theory perpetuate injustice for women. But where is the line between privacy for individual women, and treatment of the interpersonal and interfamilial issues that she argues must be understood as political, and hence, in a way, public?

2. Okin vacillates between treating “the private sphere” as a literal space (the household) and a metaphorical one (the place in which one’s individuality is cultivated). This is a politically significant ambiguity, and it is not clear that the domestic space is the only or even the best place to cultivate privacy qua individual development (as Okin acknowledges on pp. 88-9). Do people who do *not* live in a permanent private home as part of a nuclear family (everyone from the homeless to nomads to people in communal or extended kinship living situations) forego politically important possibilities

of privacy? Conversely, do people who might live alone in a secure dwelling but who risk public over-exposure—perhaps by being the victim of on-line photos or personal revelations—have a claim that privacy is denied them? (And, given new communications technologies, might this be a more pressing question for us in 2014 than it was for Okin in 1991?)

3. Okin discusses considerable advances since Locke's seventeenth-century defence of *laissez-faire* liberalism in the law, public policy, and social expectations when it comes to protecting women's equality rights (84-7). However, she makes clear that achieving justice within the family will require a lot of changes in attitudes and policies on violence, sexual assault, reproductive rights, child-rearing, work, "traditional sex roles," and so on. How far is the state entitled to go in mandating or managing (for example) anti-sexist education, or pay equity, or other interventions that are not politically supported by all of the citizens (who include people of all genders) to whom they might be applied, and by whom they might be experienced as intrusive?

4a. Okin assumes that the domestic sphere has emerged as a counterpart to the public sphere, not only conceptually but also historically. Even in the western liberal democracies she is imagining, however, heterosexual nuclear families (while idealized) are not the only kind of family. There are (and were in 1991) matrifocal families, queer families, single-parent families, extended kinship families, and so on. To what extent is Okin making arguments about justice based on an ideal family (that only some people approximate) and to what extent does she think she is basing her argument on an empirical reality?

4b. Okin treats "men" and "women" as fairly homogenous groups. "Men" are imagined as people who are married to women, relatively distant from the everyday care of their children, who do little or no housework, and who go out to work where they have an office to themselves. "Women" are imagined as people who are married to men, who do most of the work of caring for their children, most or all of the housework, and who do not work outside the home. How does it matter to Okin's argument that this does not describe all that many men or women?