

## General feedback on short papers: POL S 305

### Writing style:

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

Weaker: “Harder sets out a bunch of examples about how citizenship gets decided and how a child can have parents who are or are not related to them.”

Stronger: “Harder focuses on key cases to argue that the laws of birthright citizenship reflect dated assumptions about parenting, family, reproduction, and national membership.”

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

Weaker: “Lois Harder wrote an important essay that tells us a lot of things about how citizenship is decided based on biology.”

Stronger: “In her essay, ‘Does Sperm Have a Flag?’ Lois Harder argues that existing understandings of *jus sanguinis*—the inheritance of citizenship through relatedness—are inconsistent and outdated in light of new reproductive technologies.”

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

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

Avoid: “Harder 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 birthright citizenship deserves to be on an agenda for political reform (Harder 2014, 123). After that, you can put just the page number in brackets at the end of sentences including any citation or quotation, e.g. (123).

2. She says that birthright citizenship deserves to be on an agenda for political reform (“Sperm,” 123). Thereafter can use only page numbers, e.g. (123).

In both cases put the full reference to the text cited at the end of the essay. They are all in the class bibliography. Citing your source is a standard of good scholarship. Note that the titles of journal articles or book chapters always appear in quotes, but are not italicized or underlined. The titles of journals or books themselves are italicized or underlined.

If you attribute a view to the author that is even a bit controversial, you should cite the text. Quite a few of you made claims about what Harder says that I thought were misattributions. If I am reading your paper and thinking “Harder 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: Lois Harder. Thereafter use their last name: Harder. (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. Be careful to identify which “voice” a claim is written in.

For example: Harder says that she has “faith in biology, blood, and genetics as definitional criteria for parents and children” (125). In fact, she says that recent legal decisions show such faith. She is against it.

### **Writing and rhetorical errors**

The apostrophe in English typically indicates a **possessive** noun, e.g. Harder’s argument (the argument belonging to Harder), conservatives’ claims (the claims of the conservatives). 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.

### **Critical questions:**

As it says in the assignment rubric, in the second half of your paper I am looking for A QUESTION. Assignments that did not include a question, but made a few comments about Harder’s article, didn’t do half the assignment!

Here are some examples, quoted or paraphrased from your papers:

- Harder suggests we should move toward “non-birth-based” forms of citizenship, instead of using versions of *jus sanguinis*. Would citizenship be based on a test of commitment for adults, leaving open the possibility that individuals with the “wrong” values or who were deemed insufficiently patriotic could be denied citizenship?
- If the status of parent were awarded on the basis of the intention to love and care for a child, as Harder suggests (125), how would this be measured and guaranteed? Would it open derivative citizenship to some of the same potential abuses to which marriage for the purposes of gaining family class citizenship is currently subject?

And here is a complete example, which I wrote based on a few things that came out of the papers:

- Harder objects to the “language of blood” because it “invokes a logic of racial purity at the heart of birthright citizenship. It is a discourse of national purity, or at least coherency, that echoes other familiar and diabolical instances of insisting on blood as the basis of belonging” (120). As she also points out, insisting on genetic relatedness for citizenship rights does not, in fact, assure the nation-state of any kind of racial or ethnic uniformity. That is, current Canadian citizens come from all racial and ethnic groups, so birthright citizenship gives (or denies) rights to them all equally—at least formally speaking in law. Harder suggests instead that the “bonds of love and care and a more-or-less shared project of mutual support” as a metaphor of family formation might also inform thinking about state membership (125). This suggestion, however, also carries political risks. People love and care for each other within families for racist reasons, and sometimes exclude or marginalize those family members who are not members of the same ethnic group or don’t share the same national origin. So the kind of exclusionary thinking about the polity Harder has in mind is not caused by discourses of genetic relatedness, nor is it absent from intentional familial relationships. While this doesn’t undercut her critique of the *ad hoc* nature of current legal practice, does it make her political-theoretical alternative seem like part of the problem, rather than the beginning of a solution?

[This paragraph is 243 words]

Notice it does a few things:

- It accurately represents what Harder says, setting up a position we can safely say she defends.
- It pulls out a few things that we can safely say follow from that position—e.g. that while *jus sanguinis* might be *connected to* discourses of racial purity, it’s not clear that it *necessitates* them, because the current Canadian polity is already deeply multi-ethnic.
- Then it hones in on a problem that is embedded in what Harder *actually commits to*. It doesn’t say that she should have said more, or written a different article, or that’s she’s idealistic or unrealistic, or didn’t explain herself at the length you’d prefer. All those things may be true, but they are not difficult or challenging things to write in your paper.
- It also uses *the principle of charity*. That is, it attributes to Harder the strongest version of her position, and recognizes the argumentative goal of her article (to expose the *ad hoc* nature of current legal reasoning).
- It includes an actual question. That is, an interrogative sentence—something you could ask Lois Harder in the corridor while lifting your voice at the end of it, and expecting her to reply.