

Political Science 305 A: Contemporary Political Theory

Short papers: rubric and FAQs

Through the term you will be asked to write five short papers, each one summarizing the reading in one or two paragraphs (i.e. the first page), and then motivating and posing a question about it (i.e. the second page).

Length: not more than 500 words, or about two double-spaced pages. Please don't exceed the word limit, and note the number of words you wrote on your assignment. Assignments that exceed the word limit by more than 50 words will get a warning the first time, and one grade deducted (e.g. B- to C+) on subsequent occasions.

Deadlines and lateness: the five assignments are due at the beginning of the class meeting (0930) *after* the reading has been discussed. That is:

#1 on Harder (Does Sperm Have a Flag?): Thursday Sep 13

#2 on Okin or Young: Thursday Sep 27

#3 on Harder (The State and the Friendships of the Nation) or Hochschild: Thursday Oct 4

#4 on Arneil, Ferguson, or Donaldson and Kymlicka: Tuesday Oct 23

#5 on Arendt or Simpson: Thursday Nov 1

Late penalty for short papers is one grade increment per 24 hours or part of 24 hours: e.g. a B+ paper due on Thursday at 0930 but handed in on Friday at 1100 will receive a B-. Late papers may be e-mailed as Word attachments but otherwise please hand in a paper copy of your work in class.

Format: please write your short papers as Word documents, **double-spaced**, in 12-point font.

FAQs

How do I summarize a text?

A good summary of a text picks out the skeleton of the argument (i.e. that without which the article would simply fall down) and doesn't dwell on the flesh (i.e. the extra details, elaborations, examples, asides, repetitions etc. that characterize every text but are not essential to its point). "Abstracts" (the one paragraph summaries of articles often included in journals) usually provide good models. (If the article on which you are writing actually has an abstract, be careful not to plagiarize it!) Notice that one thing I am doing when I lecture (although less often at the 300-level than at lower levels) is modelling how to identify the central trajectory of a text. Because texts are subject to interpretation, there will always be several ways of doing this part of the assignment well.

What is "motivating" a question?

The assignment is designed to test your comprehension of the reading as well as encourage you to think about its strengths and weaknesses. So you need to show in a few linked sentences why the question you are going to pose comes out of the actual argument of the text. This will require quoting, citing, or paraphrasing something specific about the author's position correctly and fairly (with reference to particular passages or page numbers). For example: "Wittig claims that 'the category of sex is the category that sticks to women' (7);" or, "Tuana's central thesis is that

ignorance, like knowledge, is a practice that requires active development and cultivation (see esp. 195-6)". In other words, you need to show quite precisely how the text led you to your question. You also need to show why there is a tension, problem, lacuna, elision, or omission in the text that the author would need to take seriously, and that will point towards a question the class can discuss.

What is a good critical question?

A good critical question emerges from your motivating comments, and picks up on a tension or lacuna in the text. "Critical" doesn't mean hostile or negative, but it should be something that *the text's author would think they needed to respond to*. Often a good indicator of a successful critical question is that it provokes interesting class discussion, and indeed I'll sometimes introduce your questions to the class to test this criterion. A question is an interrogative sentence; i.e. one that ends in a question mark. It is not a statement.

What is a bad question?

A question that could be asked of any reading (e.g. "this analysis is all very well, but what course of action does [author X] recommend?" or "[author Y] makes some good points, but why didn't she discuss [another topic]?") are generally not very strong, unless something in your motivation makes them more specific. Questions that rest on a sloppy or inaccurate reading of the text won't do well: if the author could just respond, "but I wasn't arguing that," then obviously the question won't have legs. A question that can be answered with "yes" or "no" also generally doesn't have a lot behind it.

Why is this a useful assignment?

Pedagogically, it tests careful reading and text comprehension; the ability to reduce a large and complex text to a short and simpler précis; the ability to sort more relevant from less relevant information; and the ability to see problems with a position. There are lots of academic contexts where being able to motivate and pose a good question is a key skill—at public talks, in a seminar, just talking to someone else about a text, etc. We use these skills in everyday life, too: when your friend asks you what the movie plot was, and why you didn't like it, for example. They are also totally transferable democratic skills: think about what it takes to ask a good critical question at a public hearing, in a court, or at a political meeting. Finally, there are many work contexts where these skills are vital: one day you might need to briefly represent a complex document to a board meeting; or read a tricky legal case and find the relevant probing question to ask the defendant; or summarize a series of technical advisories so that your boss doesn't have to read them.

Can you give me some actual examples of critical questions done well?

Yes, I'll post a couple to the website.